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255 West 36th Street, 8th floor, New York, NY 10018, USA Tel: +1 212 300 2013 Fax: +1 212 300 2036

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

Volume 19, Issue 12, Number 155, December 2005

CONTENTS



22

4 Frame-by-Frame

The monthly animation planner ... Daniel Goldmark's *Tunes for Toons* ... The fresh taste of Austin's HorseBack Salad ... The animated glory of HBO's *Rome*.

8 Gaming

8 Three Times a Thief. Sucker Punch takes its best swing at keeping the Sly Cooper franchise fresh the third time around. [by Ryan Ball]

10 Features

10 Return of the Great French Warrior. The famous comic-book hero makes a triumphant leap to the big screen in M6 Studio's and A-Film's *Asterix and the Vikings*. [by Ramin Zahed] **12 Building Aslan's Magical Kingdom.** C. S. Lewis' enchanted world of Narnia comes to life thanks to a complicated collaboration between various vfx houses. [by Ellen Wolff]

16 Shorts

16 A Toon Festival Grows in Brooklyn. The director of Brooklyn's Animation Block Party writes about this relatively new event. [by Casey Safron]

18 Home Entertainment

18 The Samurai Critic. Your guide to current anime releases on DVD. [by Charles Solomon] **20 A Jazzy CG Cheer for the Whole Family.** IDT Entertainment and Harry Connick Jr.'s *The Happy Elf* sings viewers out of holiday Bluesville. [by Sarah Gurman] **21 Stocking Stuffers.** Four fantastic DVD packages that will leave you smiling this season. [by Sarah Gurman]

22 Television

22 Family Bonds. Undercover espionage is a family affair in *The X's*, Nick's cool retro toon created by Carlos Ramos. [by Chris Grove] **26 Fresh Market Wrap.** News and hot animated picks from the 21st MIPCOM TV mart in France. [by Ramin Zahed] **30 See Ya in the Suburbs, Suckas!** *The Boondocks*, Aaron McGruder's brilliant strip, comes to animated life on [adult swim] [by Ramin Zahed] **32 The Padded Cel.** Our columnist warns us about the coming animation pandemic, a distant relative of avian flu! [by Robby London] **33 It's a Wonderful Holiday Special, Mate!** *A Very Barry Christmas*, Cuppa Coffee's new stop-motion special, delivers a "Down Under" take on the holidays. [by Ramin Zahed]



10



30

34 Licensing

34 The Ultimate Animation Lover's Holiday Gift Guide. Our picks for some special toon-related books, DVDs, toys and accessories to make your holiday shopping a bit easier this year.

38 VFX

38 Keeping A Glam Heroine in Flux. Digital Domain comes to Charlize Theron's aid in the live-action version of *Aeon Flux*. [by Ron Magid] **40 State of the Art.** Burbank's Captive Audience uses a multitude of clever CG tricks to create the demons in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. [by Barbara Robertson] **42 Digital Magic.** Putting character builders in the spotlight. [by Chris Grove] **43 The Tech Review Corner.** Photoshop CS2 [by Chris Tome] **44 Vfx From A to Zathura.** Sony Pictures Imageworks blasts off to bring another Chris Van Allsburg favorite to the screen. [by Ryan Ball]

46 Opportunities

46 Community Theater. Young animators reap the rewards of a fruitful relationship between CalArts and the city of Los Angeles. [by Ellen Wolff] **50 3D Pete.** Our hero gets carried away with his cool plug-ins. [by Mike Fisher]



18

52 A Day in the Life. Santa Monica-based studio Naughty Dog lets down its guard as we visit animator Josh Scherr.

On the Cover: Created by Carlos Ramos, Nickelodeon's clever new series, *The X's*, joins the cabler's lineup in November.



It's funny the things that stay with you after a crazy week of braving a crowded market like last month's MIPCOM in France. As our company president Jean Thoren and I met and talked to many of the talented and brilliant folks at the TV mart, I promised to make note of all the cool projects coming up in the pipeline for future issues of the magazine. If it weren't for all the notes we took and the colorful one-sheets handed to us, there would be no easy way to keep a tab on all the inventive toons in production and development all over the world.

Of course, like every market these days, the promise of high-def, mobile platforms and real convergence had everybody searching for new content partners in a mad fury. It seems that everyone wants to make a *Survivor*-type alliance with the shiny new kids on the block, regardless of how the business models may evolve in the years ahead. Another trend that was clearly palpable was how many more European animation houses have been able to crack the previously impenetrable U.S. markets. Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, Jetix, Kids' WB!, 4Kids and Discovery Kids all made recent announcements about such acquisitions. This is all good news for animation producers in Canada, Europe and Asia.

Although many of the names and images are doing a crazy chicken dance in my head right now, I am happy that we got a chance to learn about two specific projects. The first was a new animated show created by the dynamic folks at Vancouver's Nerd Corps. The company's founder Asaph Fipke and its new president Ken Faier (formerly of Alliance Atlantis) showed me a clip of the visually stunning *Storm Hawks* on Faier's much-envied PSP unit. Although the show is produced with state-of-the-art CG technology, it has a deceptively simple faux 2D finish that makes it even more interesting to the eye.

Also very promising is the new *Yellow Giraffe's Animal Stories* series, which incorporate the poetry of writers such as William Blake, Rainer Maria Rilke and William Butler Yeats to convey emotions and experiences familiar to children. Directed by Janna-Maria Wahlforss and Antonia Ringborn and produced by toon veteran Mikael Wahlforss, the traditionally animated show is a labor of love in production at Turko-based Aboa Animation Studio. The beautiful oil-on-cel drawings and the universal messages of *Yellow Giraffe* made it land on top of our favorite finds at the market. Telescreen and Pearson Broadband are handling distribution rights. If there's any justice in toon town, the show will find suitable broadcast or cable partners all over world in the next few months.



Yellow Giraffe's Animal Stories

Ramin

Ramin Zahed
Editor-in-Chief
rzahed@animationmagazine.net

Quote of the Month



**"What is the purpose of this debauchery?
Money! Only a seriously sick or brainless
person could like them."**

—Children's author Maurice Sendak on recent film adaptations of *Dr. Seuss's Cat in the Hat* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Sendak's own *Where the Wild Things Are* is currently being adapted to a movie directed by Spike Jonze and penned by Dave Eggers. (From *The New York Times*)

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

December 2005

Vol. 19, Issue 12, No. 155

info@animationmagazine.net

President Jean Thoren

Publisher Jodi Bluth

Accounting Jan Bayouth

Webmaster Eric Brandenburg

EDITORIAL Edit@animationmagazine.net

Editor-in-Chief Ramin Zahed

Web and Gaming Editor Ryan Ball

Contributing Editors Chris Grove, Ron Magid,

Michael Mallory, Barbara Robertson

Editorial Assistant Sarah Gurman

Copy Editor Roberta Street

Animation Art Advisor Ron Barbagallo

Digital Reviews Editor Chris Tome

Contributors Patrick Drzen,

Mike Fisher,

Robby London, Mercedes Milligan, Mark Simon,

Charles Solomon, Ellen Wolff

ADVERTISING SALES

Sales@animationmagazine.net

Sheri Shelton , Troy Hines

PRODUCTION Prod@animationmagazine.net

Art and Production Director Susanne Rector

CIRCULATION Circ@animationmagazine.net

Circulation Director Jan Bayouth

TO ADVERTISE:

Phone: 818-991-2884

Fax: 818-991-3773

Email: Sales@animationmagazine.net

Website: www.animationmagazine.net

List Rental

Quantum List Marketing

480-860-6036

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

(USPS 015-877/ISSN 1041-617X)

Published monthly by:

Animation Magazine

30941 West Agoura Road, Suite 102

Westlake Village, CA 91361

Periodicals postage paid at Thousand Oaks Post Office, CA,
and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER:

SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO:

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

30941 West Agoura Road, Suite 102

Westlake Village, CA 91361

TO SUBSCRIBE:

For the U.S., the rate is \$50 for 12 issues or \$85 for 24 issues. Rates for Canada and Mexico are US\$65 for 12 issues or US\$110 for 24 issues delivered by foreign airmail. Foreign rates are US\$80 for 12 issues or US\$136 for 24 issues delivered by foreign airmail. Please allow six to eight weeks for initial delivery. Also available in a digital version for \$36 for 12 issues or \$60 for 24 issues.

Animation Magazine

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The Animation Planner December

FRAME-BY-FRAME

1-3 Animation and tech fans gather at the **7th Intl. Animation Technology Forum** held in the beautiful French town of Angouleme (www.magelis.org/gb/forumtechnologies/forumtechno.ideal).

2 Oscar-winner Charlize Theron will battle all kinds of villains as a tough secret agent in the live-action version of **Aeon Flux** opening in theaters today.



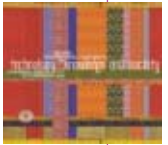
4 Look for some cutting-edge toons at the **ION International Animation, Games and Film Festival** in Los Angeles (www.ionfilmfest.com).

6 It's a big holiday shopping day for toonheads as the DVD arrivals include **Aqua Teen Hunger Force Vol. 4**; **Batman: The Animated Series Vol. 4**; **Gargoyles: Season Two, Vol. 1**; **The Proud Family Movie**; **Star Wars: Clone Wars Vol. 2**; **Superman: The Animated Series: Vol. 2**; **Walt Disney Treasures: The Chronological Donald, Vol. 2**.



9 Get ready to meet the majestic Aslan (Liam Neeson), the White Witch (Tilda Swinton) and the rest of C.S. Lewis' wonderful characters in Disney's adaptation of **The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**.

12-15 You still have a few days before the Christmas holidays, so why not hop on a plane and check out the **2nd International Conference on Technology, Knowledge and Society** in Hyderabad, India (www.technology-conference.com).



13 All kinds of cool bells and whistles are included in the new DVD **Sin City (Recut and Extended Edition)**, in stores today. Also, keep an eye out for **Cowboy Bebop Remix Vol. 4**; **DICE: Season 1 and 2**; **Kronk's New Groove**; **Scooby-Doo in Where's My Mummy?**



14 Director Peter Jackson's much-anticipated holiday film **King Kong** roars into theaters today. Look for lots of awesome visual effects courtesy of the folks at New Zealand's Weta studio.



20 The **Code Lyoko Vol. 2** DVD is the sole new arrival in stores today!



25 **The New World**, director Terrence Malick's beautifully shot 17th century saga, opens in theaters. Cory and Todd Edwards and Tony Leech offer a fresh take on the familiar tale of Red Riding Hood in the CG feature, **Hoodwinked**.



27 If you're dazzled by **Tim Burton's Corpse Bride** and the latest **Wallace & Gromit** movie, you may want to enroll in Max the Mutt's 10-day **Introduction to Stop-Motion Animation** class, taught by Jason Thompson in Toronto (www.maxthemutt.com).

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail sgurman@animationmagazine.net

FRAME-BY-FRAME

Books We Love

by Sarah Gurman

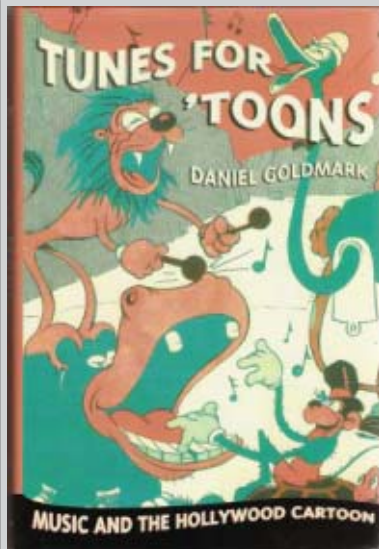
Tunes for 'Toons

By Daniel Goldmark

(University of California Press, \$24.95)

In 1940 Walt Disney released *Fantasia*, an animated feature that boldly merged the world of cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse with the classical sounds of masters such as Beethoven and Prokofiev. This sterling work spoke directly to the powerful force that can be generated by synchronizing music and moving pictures. Author Daniel Goldmark explores this critical relationship in *Tunes for 'Toons*, an in depth voyage through the history of cartoons and their accompanying melodies from the 1930s to the 1950s. With an emphasis on opera, jazz and classical music, Goldmark delivers a much-needed historical context as he looks at the impact of music on character, story and the general mood of classic animated works. The book chronicles significant moments in animation music history including the controversial appearance of jazz great Louis Armstrong in the 1932, *I'll Be Glad When You're Dead* and the broad popularity of Chuck Jones' masterful Wagner parody *What's Opera, Doc?*.

Zoning in on the careers of cartoon composing powerhouses Carl Stalling and Scott Bradley who set the standard for scoring animated comedies, *Tunes for 'Toons* includes cue sheets, articles, interviews and actual pieces of music to help the reader understand their different strategies for harmonizing notes with images



in motion. It's fascinating to read about Stalling's use of the visual pun to heighten gag effects as he composed for Warner Bros.' *Merrie Melodies* and *Looney Tunes*. For example, in Tex Avery's 1936 short *Porky's Duck Hunt*, Stalling has "Listen to the Mocking Bird" play while Porky tries to shoot a perpetually teasing Daffy. In 1943 Bradley, the music maestro behind MGM's *Tom and Jerry*, expressed his vision for the future of animated compositions noting, "when the hoped-for millennium arrives, music will be fully as important as the picture—in fact, one will be entirely dependent on the other." Goldmark's tome reveals that this inextricable link between the two mediums has always existed, both elements essential in creating the unforgettable effects we cherish. ■

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The Best Little Toon House in Austin



Patty Griffin's "Rain"

Let's start with the wonderful name, which jumpstarts all kinds of crazy images in the mind: **Horseback Salad.** That's what the Austin-based animation studio is called, and the inspiration was an unproduced screenplay written for the Marx Brothers by Spanish artist Salvador Dali (*Giraffes on Horseback Salad*). The studio has had a great year, thanks to a series of Flash-animated DVDs they produced with children's author Trevor Romain. Under the *Entertainment that Matters* banner, these 80-minute projects address issues such as dealing with bullies or parents' divorce. The shop has also done some killer work for music videos, including Pat Green's current country hit "Baby Doll" and Austin's own folk legend, Patty Griffin, with "Rain."

The studio was formed five years ago by Yehudi Mercado, Jimmy Tovar, Hoyt Lindley and Steven Mullins. Their first project was designing a trivia game for the Alamo Drafthouse movie theater, and strong word of mouth led to bigger projects. Mercado says they just finished a commercial for MTV and a couple of spots for a clean air initiative. He also finds himself traveling to Los Angeles to raise the profile of his shop and pitch original concepts for animated shows.

"For the Trevor Romain DVDs, we had our process down, so we animated with Flash straight on Wacom tablets," says Mercado. "We skipped the storyboard step and went directly to animatics. We were able to deliver the animatic in a week." According to him, the first episode cost only \$85,000, and each succeeding episode is \$120,000 now that they're adding more 3D effects in the mix.

So what does he think of the current toon climate? "It's great to see people being more open to Flash animation," he says. "The whole online boom has also been a positive force. Just look at the success of the JibJab guys as an example." He also has some good advice to young entrepreneurs who are launching their own animation studios: "Make lots of contacts and be prepared to barter. Say we'll do your website and you can help us do our music! We've been very lucky in terms of our connections and word of mouth." To find out more about this Texas hot spot, visit www.horsebacksalad.com ■



Pat Green's "Baby Doll"

When in Rome

A52 delivers a spectacular animated sequence for HBO's historical drama.

Media watchers have already made note of the full-frontal nudity, the blood-soaked violence and the outrageous sexual peccadilloes of HBO's expensive series *Rome* this fall season. How-



ever, it's the epic's stunning title sequence that has impressed vfx and animation aficionados.

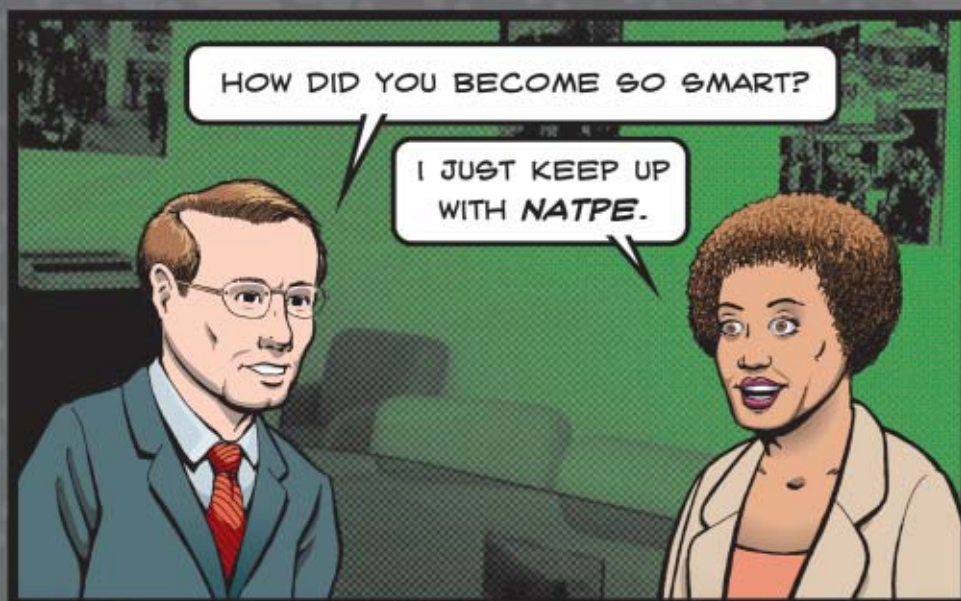
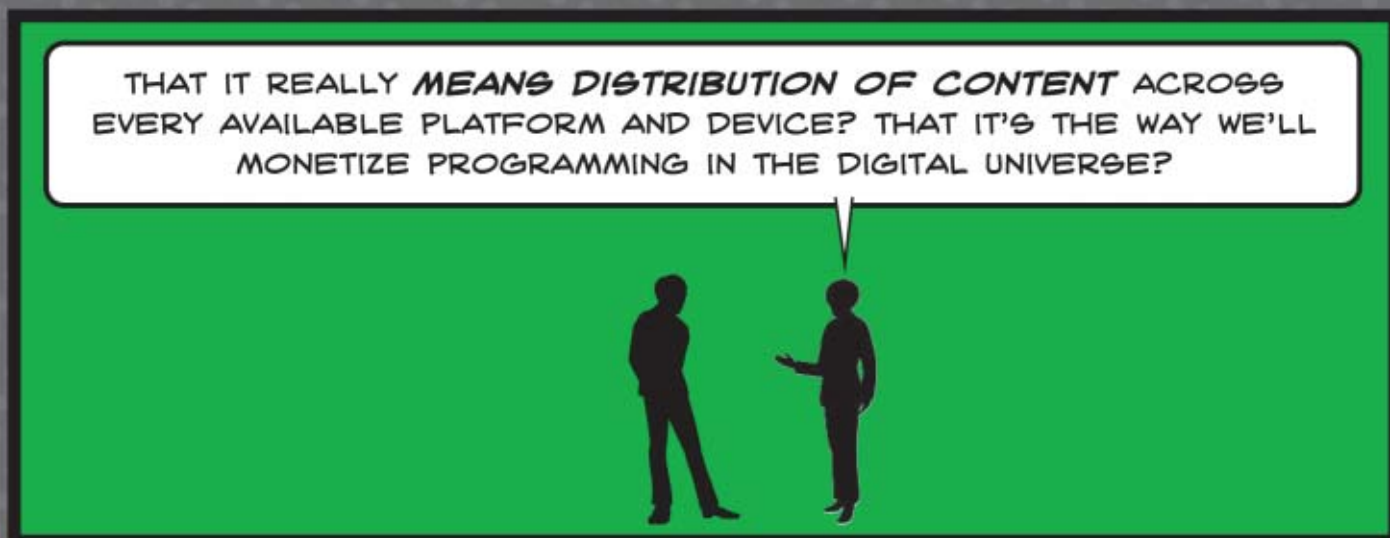
The go-second title sequence mixes live-action footage filmed on location in Rome with wall graffiti that comes to animated life, depicting the familiar mythology we've come to associate with the decadent period. The memorable opener is the handiwork of West Hollywood-based studio **A52**, which also delivered the award-winning openers for the cabler's *Carnivale* and *Deadwood*.

Under the direction of Angus Wall and Scott Boyajan, the team researched the many aspects of the tumultuous era, including the Lupercal and October Horse festivals. Using original art by Josh Bayer and Eugene Yelchin, the A52 team integrated the CG graffiti into the city's walls. One striking sequence depicts an animated chariot race, which was created from varied-rate footage and required massive 3D tracking. Using the most vibrant colors possible, the artists added grain and details to the walls, relying on Alias Maya for CG animation and Mental Ray for project rendering. All vfx were handled using Discreet's Flame and Inferno systems from Autodesk.

"On many projects, you start off with storyboards and everyone has a good idea of what it's going to look like when it's completed," says vfx artist Kirk Balden. "This was very experimental right to the very end. The tone is pretty much unlike anything we've done



and most of what any of us have seen." If you missed the run of the series on HBO (Sunday nights at 9 p.m.), don't worry. The audience's enthusiastic reception of the Roman chronicle has led to a second season order. ■



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Three Times a Thief

Sucker Punch takes its best swing at keeping the Sly Cooper franchise fresh the third time around. **by Ryan Ball**

The Thievius Raccoonus recently returned to steal precious hours of your life with the new interactive adventure *Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves*. And if we've learned anything from Hollywood, it's that delivering a satisfying third installment is a tricky thing. For every *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* there are a thousand *The Godfather Part III*s and *Blade Trinity*s. So how do you keep a popular video game from going the way of *Jaws* or *The Matrix*? For award-winning, Seattle-based developer Sucker Punch, it's not about meeting expectations, but exceeding them—and throwing a few curveballs in the process.

Sly 3 designer Nate Fox tells us keeping an ear to the ground is key when putting together a game sequel. "We're always poking around the internet reading what players have to say about the game," he says. "I'm sure they have no idea how powerful their opinions are in shaping what we make, but they're our core fans and we should give 'em what they want. Game reviews on *Sly 2* also had a big effect on our choices for *Sly 3*. Any aspect of the old game that wasn't popular we cut and worked hard to replace it with something excellent."

Fox says he personally liked the sense of teamwork involved in *Sly 2* and tried to push that concept to its limits this time around as Sly assembles a

dream team of world-class thieves in order to pull off the biggest heist in history. He comments, "The new gang members are a bunch of fun-loving criminals, and when everyone is working together on a job it just feels terrific. Having never made first string on any sports team, I can only imagine that this is what it feels like."

Character is also a key element for Sucker Punch, especially for the *Sly* franchise since the title Raccoon's attitude and magnetic personality have contributed greatly to the success of the games. In playing to that strength, the studio has been committed to creating a flowing plot where the characters grow and change from one adventure to the next. At the end of *Sly 2*, Bentley, the team's brains, gets seriously injured and is confined to a wheelchair. Feeling responsible for the accident, Murray, the team's muscle, is racked with guilt and ends up leaving the operation.

"*Sly 3* is packed with events like this, which give the characters a sense of history and depth," Fox remarks. "At one point, Sly has to work alongside one of the people who whacked his father. How would you feel about that? I couldn't do it and *Sly* doesn't do it very well either. We

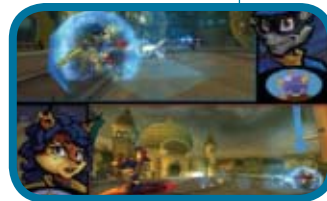
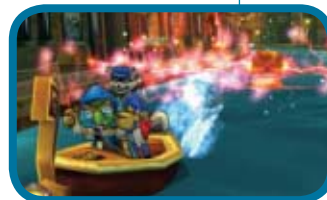
end up seeing a lot of different points of view in *Sly 3*. Even Carmelita (a cop!) is a playable character." Fox also mentions that they have produced a new comic book to go along with the game and says the medium allowed them to express Sly's inner thought process like never before.

Another goal Sucker Punch set for *Sly 3* was to create more dynamic, toon-shaded animated cut scenes, an objective reached with help from technological bumps in software and hardware. "It's now easy for us to create big group scenes with characters animating all over the place," Fox comments. "Camera moves, cuts and fades are a snap now, too. As a result, the game has a much more cinematic bent to it than previous efforts."

As cool as the new animation may be, Fox says he and his team took a new approach and put all aspects of mission design ahead of the art production pipeline. "The result is a much more diverse game with worlds that are more explicitly crafted to accentuate gameplay," he explains. "In other words, everything in the game was made to support the player's experience. The Devil is in the details, so we wanted to make sure where to focus our energy for maximum artistic impact."

One key to making any game successful is building in that all-important replay factor, and Fox insists that this latest interactive heist has it in spades. "Gamers are going to freak out when they see how much variety there is in *Sly 3*," he boasts. "None of us really had a handle on just how diverse the gameplay was until we were done and had a chance to play the missions back to back. It's crazy! Every wacko idea we had during the production got in there... and then some. Our rule was 'if it's fun, put it in,' and without question *Sly 3* is the funnest game we've ever made." ■

Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves is available exclusively for PlayStation 2 and is rated E for "Everyone." The game builds on the success of previous releases *Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus* and *Sly 2: Band of Thieves*.



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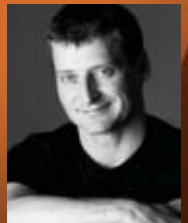
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Natalie Altmann



Stefan Fjeldmark



Jesper Moller

Return of the Great French Warrior

The world-renowned comic-book hero makes a triumphant leap to the big screen in M6 Studio's and A-Film's *Asterix and the Vikings*. **by Ramin Zahed**

To the uninitiated, the global popularity of Rene Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's wonderful comic-book creation Asterix and his best buddy Obelix may be an unsolved mystery. However, ever since the first lush comic album featuring the 50 B.C.-era Gaul warrior was introduced in 1959, readers have embraced the book series, which also pokes fun at modern-era characters and events. Not only have more than 300 million Asterix graphic books been sold worldwide, seven animated adaptations and two live-action movies have generated 45 million ticket sales.

Nevertheless, there was a general consensus that no animated movie had really been able to deliver the glorious graphic heights and comedic



genius of the books. The good news is that animation fans will have the chance to revisit this popular character next year in a new animated incarnation. Produced by France's M6 Studio and Denmark's A.Film, *Asterix and the Vikings* promises to be the best animated adaptation of the comic-book hero to date. The film, slated for an April 2006 release in France and Europe, is directed by Jesper Moller (*FernGully: The Last Rainforest*, *Tarzan II*) and Stefan Fjeldmark, the talented helmer whose credits include *Jungle Jack I and II* (1993, 1994), *When Life Departs* (1997), *Help! I'm a Fish* (2000) and *The Shepherdess & The Chimney Sweep* (2001).

According to the film's executive producer, Natalie Altmann, M6 had been in conversations with Uderzo and



Gossini's daughter and son-in-law for several years (Gossini passed away in 1977), about reviving the character in animated form. "We began by looking for the best talent we could find," says Altmann, "and when we screened Fjeldmark's *Help! I'm a Fish* for Mr. Uderzo, he really appreciated the movie and thought the style would fit Asterix perfectly."

The next step was securing the film's 22 million euro budget, which came together thanks to the efforts of distributor M6 Droits Audiovisuels, A.Film and presales. The team decided to focus on 1967 adventures titled *Asterix and the Normans*, because not only was it the first volume that



reached the one million sales mark, it also had a strong visual sense. "This adventure is opened up, so we have the Viking country backdrop as well as the usual Gaul village setting."

The film's screenplay, written by Jean-Luc Goossens in collaboration with Fjeldmark with additional dialogue by Philip Lazebnik, takes off when the Vikings kidnap Justforkix, the nephew of the Gaul's chief. Asterix and Obelix have to free the teenager before it's too late. Of course, as fate would have it, Justforkix has fallen in love with ABBA, the daughter of the Viking's leader. (Yup, she's Scandinavian and bears an uncanny resemblance to one of the lead singers of the '70s supergroup!)

"Justforkix is a city kid. He can dance and flirt with the girls, but he's not a warrior and hates conflict and violence," says Altmann. "Kids will like him because he's funny and he disobeys the grown-ups and adults will like him because his character has to evolve and becomes brave in the end." Of course, there are also plenty of tongue-in-cheek asides: For example, ABBA's mother is named Vikea, and she's very fond of Scandinavian design!"

Altmann says the producers deliberately decided to animate the film in traditional 2D. "We felt that the comic book was 2D, and we really wanted to have the existing character come to life," says Altmann. "The cartoony, stretch and squash



Asterix
AND THE
VIKINGS
OBELIX



feel of the project would be very hard to do in CGI. The previous Asterix movies were also in 2D, but the animation was done a long time ago and didn't have the quality and technology that we have access to today. Of course, in the future, we might adapt the characters in CG, but we really wanted to stick to the classic look for this movie. You will notice that because of

the modern compositing techniques we used, there's a great integrated feeling of depth in the movie." Altmann also points out that keen-eyed moviegoers will recognize several CG elements in the mix, in the rendering of vehicles and some background scenes.

The animation work was divided between the production houses in France and Denmark, Nomos Studio, A.Film and 2D/3D Animations in Angouleme (which also worked on *The Triplets of Belleville*). The post-production work is done in France, while A.Film is handling all the logistics in Denmark.

So what makes these characters have such a long-lasting popularity with comic-book readers and moviegoers? Perhaps, it's the fact that the stories center on a group of underdogs who band together to defeat a bigger enemy—Julius Caesar and the crushing force of the Roman Empire. "Uderzo was a Frenchman with Italian origins and Goscinni came from an Argentinian background," says Altmann. "These two immigrants created something that although is very French on the surface, it appeals to all nationalities. When the Germans read it,

they think he's German; the same is true for the Italians or the English or Latin American readers. It strikes a universal chord because it's funny and it focuses on solidarity of a charming group of characters."

The biggest challenge for the filmmakers was staying faithful to the timeless characters and wonderful storylines of the original graphic novels. "You are dealing with existing characters, so you always have to keep the originals in mind. In addition to delivering high-quality visuals, you have to respect the design, the spirit and the themes. Even when you add some modern elements, you have to be faithful to the originals' spirit."

For Altmann, who grew up reading Asterix books as well, nothing can come too close to the little Gaul and his buddies in the comic-book universe. "It's a world that is passed on from one generation to another in Europe," she explains. "Asterix is the first character that comes to mind when we discuss comic books."

No wonder that for the French producer making Asterix's original creator happy was one of the most satisfying aspects of the project. "My proudest achievement was putting that smile on Mr. Uderzo's face," she explains. "When we showed him the first part of the finished movie, he was very pleased. He told us, 'At last, I can see my characters come to life, just as I had wished they would be animated.'"

The first 20 minutes of *Asterix and the Vikings* screens at the American Film Market in Santa Monica, California, on November 4. The U.S. version features the voices of Paul Giamatti, Brad Garrett, Sean Astin and Evan Rachel Wood. The feature opens in France on April 12, 2006. For more info visit www.asterix.com

An Asterix Movie Chronology

1967	Asterix the Gaul
1968	Asterix and Cleopatra
1976	The Twelve Tasks of Asterix
1985	Asterix Versus Caesar
1986	Asterix in Britain
1989	Asterix and the Big Fight
1994	Asterix Conquers America
1999	Asterix and Obelix Take On Caesar (live action)
2002	Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra (live action)
2006	Asterix and the Vikings
2007	Asterix in the Olympic Games (live action)



Building Aslan's Magical Kingdom

ILM, Sony Pictures Imageworks and Rhythm & Hues worked closely to deliver the amazing CG visuals of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. **by Ellen Wolff**

R

eaders of C.S. Lewis' classic series *The Chronicles of Narnia* can picture a fantasyland populated by mythical beasts such as centaurs, fauns and minotaurs—not to mention talking animals. But filming that world has proved daunting. It has been argued—notably by *Shrek* director Andrew Adamson—that animating Lewis' creatures in a photorealistic way wasn't possible even five years ago. But now, aided by computer animators at Rhythm & Hues, Sony Pictures Imageworks and ILM, Adamson has directed a lavish feature based on the books for Disney that should please both fans and neophytes this holiday season.

The Chronicles of Narnia:

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the opening tale of Lewis' series introduces four English children who flee the London blitz in WWII and fall into the magic land of Narnia through a mysterious wardrobe. They befriend a host of chatty critters—including the wise lion Aslan (voiced by Liam Neeson)—and ultimately confront

the White Witch (Tilda Swinton) who has cursed Narnia with eternal winter. The story's climactic battle, featuring 10,000 creatures fighting in broad daylight, caps an adventure that required the latest CG tricks.

Visual effects supervisor Dean Wright was no stranger to such an epic challenge, having worked on Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*, but he thinks *Narnia*'s 1,400-plus effects shots presented a greater degree of difficulty. "Percentage-wise, there are more visual effects per scene-second. And the complexity is much higher because the performances that rely on visual effects are much greater." And the creatures (designed by Weta's

Richard Taylor) were also more diverse, including 23 different species that were either half-human or all-CG. They comprised more than half the film's cast.

**Doing it
Round-Robin
Style**

Compounding the





Winter Wonderland: *Shrek* director Andrew Adamson faced the daunting task of bringing C.S. Lewis' fantastic creatures to life in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In addition to Aslan the Lion, the vfx teams were responsible for creating an assortment of mythical creatures such as centaurs, minotaurs, fauns and man-goats.



Andrew Adamson

difficulty was the fact that three major effects vendors had to work together in unprecedented ways, sometimes contributing animated elements to the same shot. For example, says Wright, "ILM might finish the background characters and send that to R&H, which would take it as if it was a photographic plate, put a character on top and composite. Or R&H might finish an element and send it to ILM or Sony. It was a round robin."

R&H was the first house selected for *Narnia* and had the crucial task of animating Aslan the Lion (see Sidebar). The vfx house also handled centaurs, using Giant Studios' mo-capped horses to animate the human/equine beasts. And for the first time, R&H used Massive's A.I. software (famously employed in *Rings*) to stage the film's huge battle.

Next on board was Sony, whose assignments included animating wolves and key personalities like a talking fox, beavers and the man/goat character Tumnus. Sony also handled the bombing of London, which was almost all CGI.

Finally ILM entered to tackle a legion of fully animated animals for the battle, including wolves, wild cats and assorted mythical beasts. While R&H and Sony handled most of the speaking characters, ILM created a talking





Atticus Finch Meets the Lion King

Rhythm & Hues builds an Aslan based on Gregory Peck.

As the 'conscience' (and some believe Christ-like figure) of Narnia, the lion Aslan had to deliver a nuanced performance—throughout 140 shots. Even before Liam Neeson recorded Aslan's voice, R&H animation supervisor Richie Baneham had an inspiration. He studied the Oscar-winning performance of Gregory Peck as the principled lawyer Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



Peck

+



Neeson

=



Aslan

motions we would have never have thought to put in if we were just building it synthetically."

To make Aslan speak convincingly, R&H scoured reference footage of lions, looking for facial movements that could be applied to speech. "The lion could have been sneezing," says Westenhofer, "but that showed us what a lion's anatomy could do. We combined those shapes to find lion-based performances that matched the different expressions from Atticus. That built our library of how Aslan could perform. He is, by orders of magnitude, the most complex CG creature we've ever made." ■

Bill Westenhofer recalls how R&H strove to strike a balance between Finch's countenance and footage of lions. "It was pretty insane. We went in a cage with a lion and filmed high-def motion studies that were invaluable. We could lay our animation and lighting side-by-side with a real lion and see, iteratively, how muscles moved in fine detail. It gave us subtle

sprite fashioned from apple blossoms.

To orchestrate cooperation among studios that use proprietary software, Wright recalls, "We had a big summit where we all sat down in one room and went through the shared shots and figured out who would deliver the comp. Depending on the shot, it came down to whoever put the last important characters on top. For instance, if ILM did the background creatures, then R&H would put Aslan in and give us the final comp."



Vfx supervisor
Dean Wright



Scott Farrar (ILM)



Jim Berney
(Sony)



Bill Westenhofer
(R&H)

Far from Fanciful

Early on, director Adamson made the choice to create the talking animals almost entirely in CG and not rely on animatronics or the muzzle-replacement strategies used in films like *Babe*. "It wouldn't have been cost-effective to do muzzle replacement and full CG," notes Jim Berney, Sony's visual effects supervisor.

Creating photorealistic wolves was especially tricky for David Schaub's Sony animation crew, explains Berney, "Because our wolves had to match spot-on with real wolves, even within one shot. There's also lots of character interaction. The fox gets trashed by the wolves; they're carrying him around and pummeling him in the snow." Berney adds. "Since *Stuart Little* we've developed combing tools to visualize hair quickly without having to go through our RenderMan pipeline. We built the creatures one hair at a

time—OK, that's an exaggeration—100 hairs at a time! We had to figure out the dynamics of each region where there's hair-to-hair collisions or interactions with wind. Once we did the animation and translated it to be rendered, the fur dynamics were applied automatically. We had to do hand work only about 10% of the time."

Creating photoreal furred characters was a challenge also tackled by the animators at R&H. "The lion Aslan had 10 million hairs in his mane alone," notes visual effects supervisor Bill Westenhofer. So in a scene where Aslan steps on one of Sony's wolves, the simulation dynamics go off the charts. Westenhofer explains R&H's close collaboration with Sony by saying, "We shared the camera tracks and passed stuff through Maya. We'd do a blocking pass and give them our geometry in the camera space. They'd work another blocking pass around that and then we'd go back and forth to refine it."

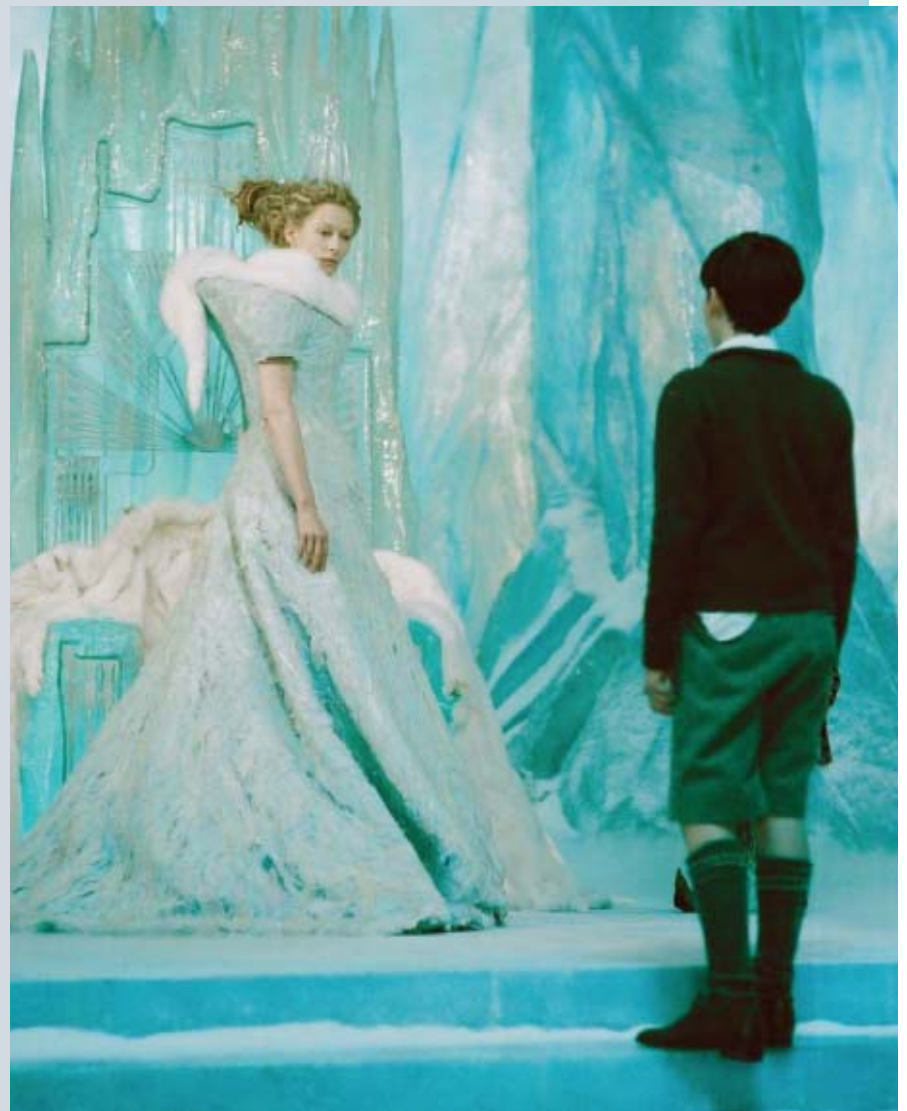
Men in Green Tights

Giant Studios' 100-day mocap shoot also played a major role in *Narnia*, providing data for a host of half-human characters. As ILM visual effects supervisor Scott Farrar explains, "The centaurs, minotaurs, satyrs and fauns were all humans with various costumes on their upper bodies, and their lower bodies were green tights with [tracking] dots on them." In what sounds like a Monty Python skit, actors pranced around in those tights and were mocapped so that their upper torsos would appear to be motivated by animal legs added later. It took considerable experimentation, notes Farrar. "How does a faun with extra joints in his leg walk—compared to humans?"

Animating horse bodies for the galloping centaurs was a key challenge for Jennifer Emberly's animation team at ILM and also for R&H. Westenhofer credits "some really clever brain writing in the Massive software to 'time' the action so it felt like the human half



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was driving the horses' legs."

Whether driven by mo-cap or pure CG, Farrar believes that all the animation incorporated in the movie is quite sophisticated. "It's a big decision to make this world of CG creatures be mostly realis-

tic," he adds. "It sweeps you away to a world you've never seen before." ■

Disney's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* opens in theaters on December 9.

FEATURE



Casey Safron

A Toon Festival Grows in Brooklyn

The director of Brooklyn's Animation Block Party writes about this relatively new toon event which wears its indie/punk credentials on its sleeve. **by Casey Safron**

Our story begins in July of 2004; my friends and I were screening 80 minutes of curated animation shorts at a bar in Soho. Someone at the club invited *The New York Times* to do a focus piece on Dahlia's Flix and Mix, the organization helping us hold the screening. The bar was packed, and fans mingled with animators long after the show ended.

It only made sense to keep getting animators' work seen as long as people were interested. So we searched for a title to our first "end of summer" event. Over lunch at Burger Heaven, my college roommate, Jonathan Lang, helped me brainstorm for potential titles to this animation festival.

We decided to hold a small Animation Block Party in East Williamsburg. Jon's store, The Archive, would host the after-party, and I would curate the animation showcase, which would be exhibited on the rooftop of a hipster venue called Office-Ops, with the Manhattan skyline as its backdrop.

When I was growing up in New York, the opportunities to see cool and diverse animation were rare. Spike and Mike, Best of Ottawa at the local indie-theater, ASIFA-East screenings at SVA, mini-Russian animation fests, gallery shows of experimental work—all great stuff, but if you read this magazine and live in New York, you probably know the routine.

Animation Block Party offered something

different, something fresh, and, as animation aficionados have told me, something a little punk rock. On September 9, 2004, you could see the towers of light where the World Trade Center used to be shining as Animation Block Party unveiled its inaugural event.

Hundreds of New Yorkers trudged through the torrential rain, which stopped minutes before the show, and enjoyed 90 minutes of festival shorts on wet plastic chairs. The



after-party rocked all night, thanks to Pabst Blue Ribbon and Krispy Kreme. (Note to future event planners: Neither substance should really be mass consumed.)

After this first event, we decided to open the call for entries to anyone who had a new animated short. As a result, Animation Block received nearly 650 submissions. With the help of festival partner Withoutabox.com, we received web entries from Canada, Australia and all over Europe. Submissions were also welcome on our website thanks

to Glenn Eaton of Illhouse Design.

This burst of submissions allowed us to hold two kick-ass Animation Block Party events in the heart of Brooklyn. The first official ABP festival that was open for international submissions was a popular Valentine's Day event, which proved that it will always rain whenever we have one of these things.

Again, animation fans slogged through the crappy weather to watch the world's best shorts and to party at Frank's Cocktail Lounge, featuring NYC's original Hip Hop Karaoke. For the first time, we gave juried awards, honoring a few animators with prizes from our festival sponsors.

In September 2005, the second festival commemorated the end of another NYC summer, featuring over 60 short films featured in three screenings at BAM Rose Cinemas in downtown Brooklyn. Filmmakers and fans partied after the show at Moe's on Lafayette Avenue, feeding their stomachs with cookies from RMF foods.

Our jury members have included top professional animators and artists of all styles and ages, including Jeff Scher, Julianna Cox, Howard Beckerman, Emily Hubley, Peter Sluska, Machi Tantillo, Richard Gorey, Ira Verbitsky and Doug Crane. These diverse minds have helped us award various deserving animators great prizes from our festival sponsors, Boinx Software, NY Central Art Supply, RES and *Animation Magazine*.

All the winning festival films are listed on our website at www.animationblock.com, but the most interesting prize we were able to offer was at our September 2005 event. ABP sponsor, Crumpler Bags, awarded the rare opportunity for the student film winner to direct an animation spot for them. This prize was awarded to Rhode Island School of Design's Lizzi Akana for her film, *Marvelous, Keen Loony Bin*.

In 2006, we plan to bring more animation to the NYC and international spotlight with one BIG Animation Block Party festival. Please stay tuned to our website for updates and information. And if you're an animator, no matter where you live, we hope you will continue to send us your best work and hopefully we can help you get it seen and recognized for the great art that it is. ■

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The Samurai Critic:

Reviews of this month's hot new anime titles on DVD



Illustration by Dan Hoffstedt

by Charles Solomon

Rurouni Kenshin Economy Box TV Season 1 (Media Blasters: \$79.95, 6 discs)



During the civil wars surrounding the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Kenshin Himura was a deadly Imperialist assassin. Ten years later, he remains a swordsman of unequalled skill, but he's sworn never to kill again. He knocks enemies senseless but doesn't draw blood. Short and skinny with a mop of red hair, Kenshin is also something of a klutz and the butt of much of the slapstick humor.

The filmmakers use the episodes in the first ("Tokyo") arc of the popular comedy-adventure to introduce a cast of engaging misfits. After a decade of wandering, Kenshin arrives in Tokyo and quickly befriends "Miss Kaoru," who inherited an impoverished dojo from her murdered father; Yahiko, an orphan forced to work as a pick-pocket; and Sanosuke, a formidable ex-soldier who saw his comrades betrayed.

This unconventional quartet battles counter-revolutionaries, gangsters and smugglers. Director Kazuhiro Furuhashi stages the sword fights with great panache, using rapid cutting, split-screen and reversed color to heighten the excitement—and to match the dramatic battles in Nobuhiro Watsuki's original manga. Richard Hayworth, who provides Kenshin's voice, comments, "I'm in pretty good shape, but after a long fight scene I'm often sweating and winded." Kenshin's duels sometimes

leave the audience sweating and winded too. But the carefully balanced mixture of furious combat, warm personal interaction and broad comedy gives *Rurouni Kenshin* the special appeal that makes it one of the best-loved anime series of all time.

Wolf's Rain Complete Collection Limited Edition Box Set (Bandai: \$149.98, 7 discs)

Four shape-shifting young men prowled the half-ruined cities 200 years after the collapse of human civilization in *Wolf's Rain*. They're not werewolves, but they can appear in human or lupine guise. Charismatic Kiba is joined by cynical Tsume, eager To-boe and perpetually hungry Hige in his quest for "Rakuen," the legendary paradise that can only be found by wolves. The search is linked to the Moon Flowers, and to Cheza, a mysterious girl created from those flowers. As the quartet travels north, they encounter allies, enemies, battles and a growing perception that the end of the world is approaching.

This epic tale borrows heavily from the Norse myths of the *Ragnarok*, an ongoing cycle of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth. The filmmakers complicate their story with unnecessary characters and subplots (some of them introduced in the final episodes). They leave some story points unresolved and drag others out to needless lengths. In its better moments, *Wolf's Rain* feels compelling, but it could easily have been more satisfying than it



is. Nevertheless, the dark colors, alienated anti-heroes and deft mixture of fantasy and science fiction elements will please fans of Gothic anime.

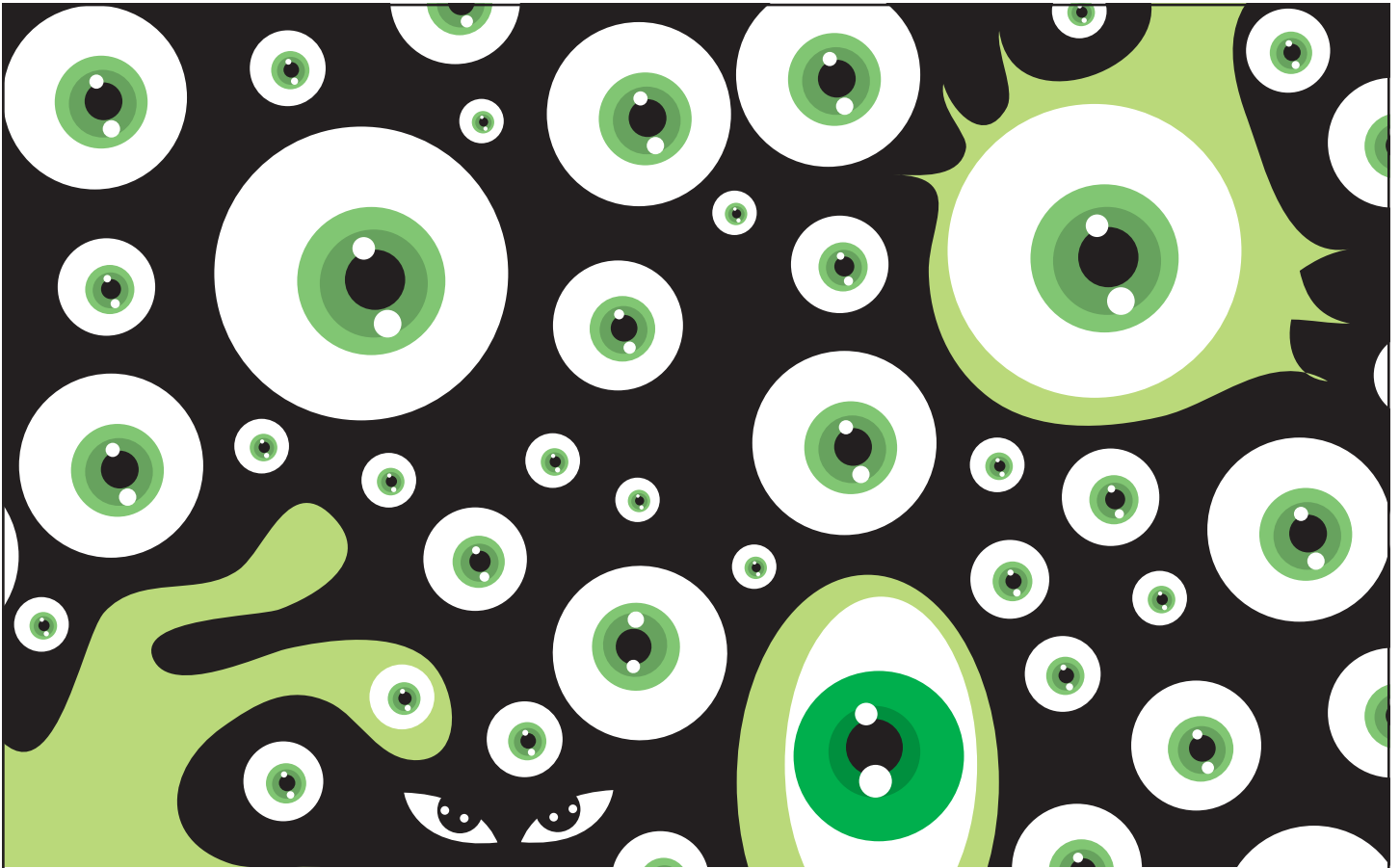
Saikano: The Complete Box Set (Viz: \$79.98, 4 discs)

Saikano was one of the first "murderous moppet" series—stories that center on young women who have been turned into deadly weapons. Chise, an awkward teen-age girl, and Shuji, a taciturn high school boy, have just begun a clumsy romance when Japan is attacked and war breaks out. The Japanese government has used Chise in an experimental weapons program, seemingly without her knowledge or consent. In battle, she mutates into a terrible *mecha* that destroys everything in its path. Shuji and Chise aren't particularly endearing young lovers; she whines, he dithers ineffectually. But what else

can two teenagers do when they're pitted against forces beyond their control and comprehension?

Saikano doesn't feel like it should be a hit: The tone is bleak, the main characters are maladroit and the palate runs to washed-out grays and tans. But its popularity on both sides of the Pacific suggests that it embodies the fears of young viewers who feel impotent in an increasingly dangerous world. ■





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A Jazzy CG Cheer for the Whole Family

IDT Entertainment and Harry Connick Jr.'s *The Happy Elf* sings viewers out of holiday Bluesville. **by Sarah Gurman**

Any holiday music aficionado knows that the smooth voice of Harry Connick Jr. is the perfect complement to the soft ringing of Christmas bells and Santa's deep rounds of Ho Ho Ho's. The folks at Newark, New Jersey-based animation powerhouse IDT Entertainment recognized this winning combination and added the key ingredient to their new hour-long merry-making CG package *The Happy Elf*, which will enter the annual Christmas special showdown this holiday season.

Based on the original children's song from Connick's 2003 release *Harry for the Holidays*, *The Happy Elf* spotlights Eubie, an elf who goes above and beyond the call of Christmas spirit duty to help all of the naughty-listed children from the downtrodden town of Bluesville. Bursting with pep and optimism, Eubie uses his irresistible charm and jazzy tunes to put some smiles and good behavior back in town so Santa will bring the kids the joys and toys of the holiday.

Connick, a veteran of two previous holiday specials, presented his idea for *The Happy Elf* to IDT's COO John Hyde and Sidney Clifton,

senior VP of programming and development for Film Roman, in March of 2004. "Literally, with some drawings and the song, the three of us sat down, and we immediately said 'That's it. We want to do it!'" Hyde recalls. "We felt the character itself would be something that would be a long-term franchise, that we could build around the little elf as a Christmas character."

Shortly thereafter, IDT (which wholly owns or has minority interests in various toon and vfx outfits such as Mainframe, DPS Film Roman, Vanguard Animation, Anchor Bay Home Entertainment and Stan Lee's POW! Entertainment) decided to develop *The Happy Elf* in CG, believing it would be a better fit for a family franchise. "I think that most animated Christmas specials are traditional 2D half-hour shows that are looked at as being for children," Hyde notes. "We really wanted it to be a Christmas special for the entire family, and we felt that to do it in CGI would be stronger than to do it in 2D."

The project's animation director, John Rice, mentions several factors that he felt made CG

advantageous. "We can put an incredible amount of detail into our character designs and props and it's quite easy to adjust or change camera angles even after a shot has been fully animated," Rice notes. "Even putting a shadow on an animated character in 2D can be too expensive for most TV productions, but with 3D, we not only get shadows, we can also use several light sources of different colors and intensities coming from all different directions."

The team was able to produce *The Happy Elf*'s vibrant visuals within the original \$2.5-to-\$3 million-ballpark budget. Rice explains, "We used Photoshop for our background designs and paintings and for many of the model textures too, Final Cut Pro for the dialog edit, building the storyboard animatic and editing the final picture and Maya for building and rigging models, animation, lighting and rendering."

In addition to targeting the entire family through the project's CG animation, IDT assembled a stellar voice cast that includes Carol Kane (*Annie Hall*, *Taxi*) and Lewis Black (*The Daily Show*) with Mickey Rooney (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *The Fox and the Hound*) as Santa. Of course, IDT banked on the popularity of Connick, whose previous toon roles include that of hipster Dean McCoppin in *The Iron Giant*, to draw in a broad audience. For *The Happy Elf*, Connick wrote three original songs as well as the entire score and also voiced the narrator. In fact, Connick's creative influence on the project spread beyond the groovy tunes. "He spent a lot of time with our artists looking at the various drawings conceptually, so there's a lot of Harry in this project," Hyde says.

IDT believes they have found a classic character in jolly little Eubie whose enthusiasm gives Bluesville a Christmas pick-me-up. As Hyde puts it, "Especially now that we've seen the results, we feel that he's an absolute natural to become a real traditional Christmas character which will have years of life in it." ■

IDT's *The Happy Elf* premieres Dec. 2 on NBC at 8 p.m. The DVD will be available in stores on Dec. 6. For more information visit www.thehappyelf.com.



John Hyde



John Rice

Stocking Stuffers

Forget about eggnog and fruitcakes. The real reason to look forward to the holidays are some of the amazing toons available on DVD in the next few weeks. **by Sarah Gurman**

Chip N' Dale Rescue Rangers: Vol. 1 (Buena Vista Home Video, \$34.27)

Sometimes some crimes go slipping through the cracks, but these two gumshoes are picking up the slack. Yes, it was worth watching Disney TV's *Chip N' Dale Rescue Rangers* just to hear the opening song. Indeed, the fedora-donning Chip and his laid back compadre Dale were an essential element in any well-rounded Disney Afternoon experience. And let's not forget Monterey Jack, Zipper and the alluring mousetress of invention, Gadget Hackwrench (who has developed quite a following online), the crew behind the fuzzy super sleuths that made all of this quirky crime fighting possible. We've missed them sorely since the show last aired in 1990, but thankfully, Chip N' Dale will be cracking the case in the 27-episode, three-disc DVD set out in time for 614 minutes of glorious home entertainment viewing this holiday season.



able DVD release of the Mouse House's first daily animated TV series, *DuckTales* (which goes back to Sep. 1987). The time has come to return to Duckburg Mansion and get reacquainted with Donald Duck's fab nephews, Huey, Dewey and Louie, as they journey where ever adventure takes them. With the help of their pilot, Launch-Pad McQuack (who later saddled up as Darkwing Duck's sidekick), Mrs. Beakley and Webby, Scrooge and the boys throw wrenches in the schemes of thieves like the Beagle Boys and Magica deSpell and embark on thrilling treasure hunts near and far, traveling everywhere from the Mayan Pyramids to the Bermuda Triangle to the Fountain of Youth. Long live McDuck Enterprises!

Mission Hill: The Complete Series (Warner Home Video, \$29.99)

After working as exec producers and head writers on *The Simpsons*, Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein had a hankering to do a show about 20somethings. Their post-*Simpsons* brainchild, *Mission Hill*, received a lukewarm response during its run on the WB in 1999 and only six of the 13 episodes aired before it was cancelled. However, the series was resurrected in all of its Gen X glory on Cartoon Network's [adult swim] where it developed a cult following. And now, finally, we can watch all 13 chestnuts packed with the exploits and spoils of Andy French, a 24-year-old aspiring cartoonist who works at Waterbed World when



he's not hitting Mission Hill's hip party scene. Sharing an apartment with his ever-mellow best friend Jim Kuback and the flower power-minded Posey Tyler, everything is going smoothly in Andy's chill bubble of slackerdom until his little brother Kevin (a true-blue nerd armed with medicated shampoo and computer games) joins the roster of roommates. The two-disc package, which includes audio commentary on four episodes from the creators as well as an interactive map of Mission Hill, should provide sumptuous viewing for your post-turkey dinner couch-potato sessions.

The Polar Express (Warner Home Video, \$29.95)

Though Robert Zemeckis' all-digital adaptation of Chris Van Allsburg's classic children's book left the critics divided, no one will dispute that the movie's



stunning and innovative visuals make a trip to this Mo-Cap winter wonderland more than worth your while. With a stellar soundtrack and Alan Silvestri's Oscar-nominated ditty *Believe*, Tom Hanks clocking in for five roles and a magical storyline about the power of belief, *The Polar Express* might be just the ticket for those of you whose Christmas spirit engines are sputtering. The two disc \$29.95 release comes equipped with an array of bells and whistles, including a segment with Chris Van Allsburg explaining his inspiration for the book, the "You Look Familiar" featurette where Hanks chats about his various roles, a behind-the-scenes look at performance capture and the never-before-heard song "Smokey and Steamer." We think Hero Boy, the winding CG train and snow-laden North Pole backgrounds will fit right in with Rudolph, Charlie Brown and the rest of the regulars in your holiday season must-watch repertoire. ■



Let's be honest. There's no shame in wanting to swim through a lustrous pool of gold coins a la thriftmeister Scrooge McDuck. We should just all admit we want to bathe in the imaginary coin glory of the Money Bin, and then, with real money, go purchase the inval-



Family Bonds

Undercover espionage is a family affair in *The X's*, Nick's cool retro toon created by Carlos Ramos. **by Chris Grove**

There's an old vaudeville proverb—or at least the late Johnny Carson said it was an old saw and was fond of quoting it—that a comic is a person who says funny things and a comedian is a person who says things funny. If that's the case, then the members of the X family are a bit of both. Especially if you happen to fit into the demographic of boys six to 11 (and their fathers) that the new Nickelodeon series, *The X's*, is aimed at. In large measure, an eight-year-old boy's idea of great comedy is a world in which characters are flawlessly fighting the forces of evil one moment with cool weapons and witty ripostes and running into a brick wall the next. (Which also happens to be the sense of humor of the average American dad. Hence the 8 p.m. time slot for the series' November 25 debut—the day after Thanksgiving 2005).

The X's puts a family of super spies

in the midst of plain vanilla suburbia as they simultaneously try to fight the super-villains of SNAFU (led by the megalomaniac Glowface) and fit in as just another "normal" family. "I've always wanted to do a family series where, for one reason or another, they're fantastic," says series creator Carlos Ramos. Described as a throwback to old spy series, the toon is inspired by *Get Smart*, *The Avengers* and James Bond movies. Yet Ramos says he didn't waste time watching old episodes or films. "I like to be influenced more by my memory than the exactness of things," he says. The music, about which he's also "meticulous," pays homage to the soundtracks of the Bond films, Alfred Hitchcock and the Beatles, depending on a particular episode's central character.

In a rarity for a cartoon TV series, the part of Mr. X was specifically written for actor Patrick Warburton (*Seinfeld*,

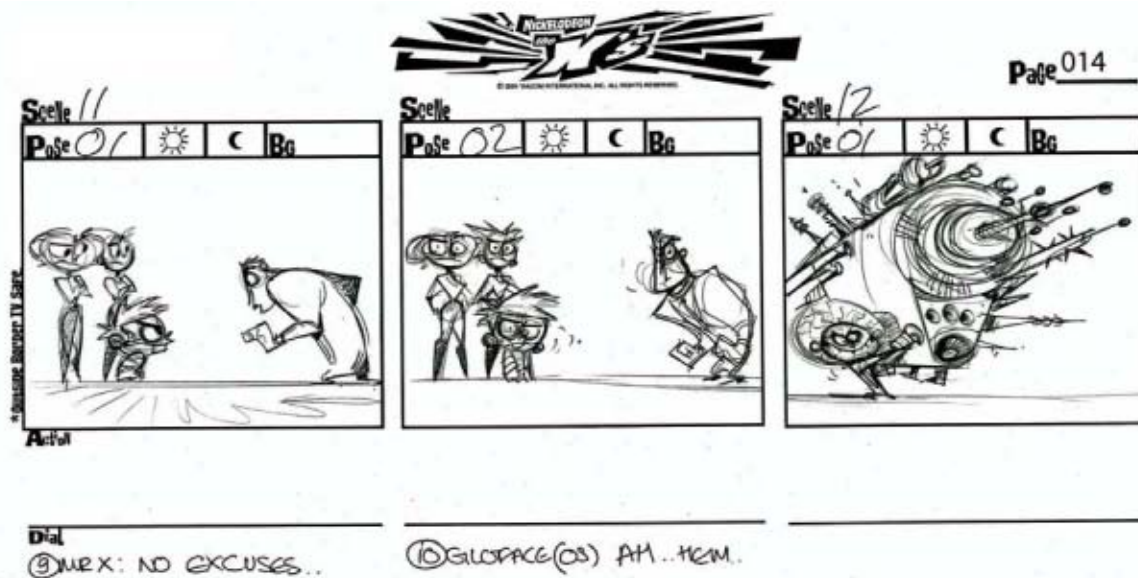
The Tick). Warburton, who perfected the archetype earnestly dense American male as David Puddy, puts it to good use here. It doesn't hurt that his main foil, Mrs. X, is played by another top comic talent, Wendie Malick (*Just Shoot Me*). His two feisty kids are voiced by Jansen Panettiere (*Racing Stripes*) and Lynsey Bartilson (*Grounded For Life*). "It's a lot easier to write when you can hear Patrick and Wendie's voices in your head," says Ramos. Because Warburton and Malick command hefty salaries in live-action TV, it's hard to pin down the budget for each half-hour episode. Nick execs aren't saying, but it's a good bet



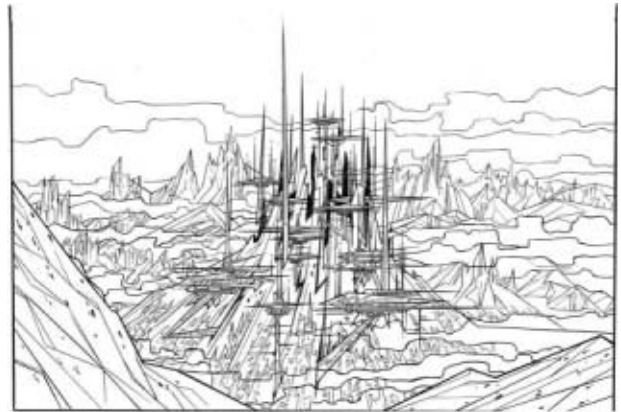
Carlos Ramos



Marjorie Cohn



Dysfunction Junction:
The retro look of *The X's* is on full display in these storyboard drawings.



the budget is beyond the average for animated half-hours. Ramos has given the show a stark look with a 1960s graphic design.

"It feels old and new at the same time," he says. The central characters are differentiated from the background by the use of color and shade only. There are no hard lines around them. "It's a complicated look," Ramos says. Among other things in his young career, Ramos won a prestigious Annie Award for designing and creating the *Oh Yeah! Cartoons* shorts *A Dog and his Boy*, *Twins Crimson* and *Those Amazing Robots*. And he spent time as a storyboard artist and art director on *My Life as a Teenage Robot* and *ChalkZone*. The premise of *The X's* invites inevitable comparisons to *The Incredibles*. Pixar's Bob Parr, retired superhero, heads a family of a super-powered wife and kids. Nickelode-

on's Mr. X, fully employed super-spy, heads a family of super spies. Both families are trying to live the American suburban lifestyle with mixed results. But it's a comic structure that's been strip-mined in American film and television for decades. *The Munsters*, after all, was a family of Frankensteins who thought they were the normal family and everyone else was tragically ugly and eccentric. And the Clampett's of *The Beverly Hillbillies* had no idea that they were "backward." They thought their Beverly Hills neighbors were soft and uncultured.

Far from following the successful Pixar film, Ramos pitched the idea to Nick execs soon after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, when *The Incredibles* was only a glint in the eye of Pixar creatives. Ramos says Nicktoons Animation Studios vice president/general manager Mark Tay-

lor and his colleagues were intrigued by a show where the bonds of a family protect it from the evils of the world. "We had a meeting with Carlos and he showed us this amazing piece of art," recalls Marjorie Cohn, Nickelodeon's executive vice president of development and original programming. Also present at the meeting was Eric Coleman, vice president of animation development and production for Nickelodeon Animation Studios. "It looked so different from anything we'd seen before. You could see the show in that one picture."

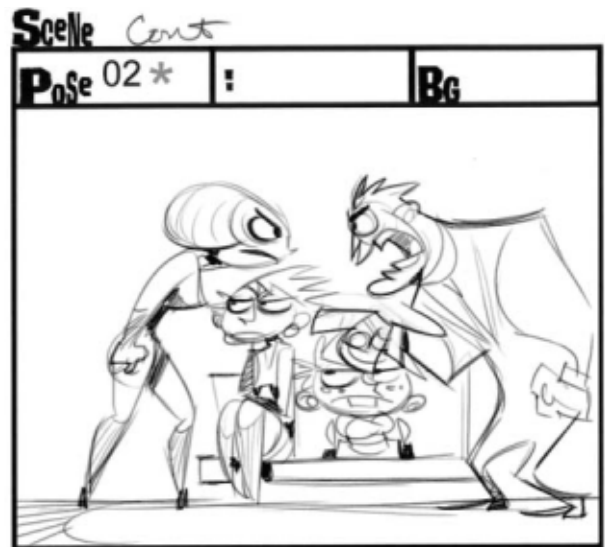
Nickelodeon has had quite a run in the past ten years. With the (sometimes unexpected) mega success of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *The Fairly OddParents* and *Rugrats* et al., the cabbler has been a ratings top dog year in and year out. Despite that, execs claim they don't feel a lot of pressure to keep the hits coming. In some cases,



it's just a matter of math. "The more shots you have, the better chance you have to create characters that pop," Nickelodeon Networks president Herb Scannell said in a *USA Today* interview late last year. "We have to approach each project the same," says Cohn. "We look for creative people with a strong vision, and then we help nurture and protect it. You hope you get lightning in a bottle, but you can't force it." As with most animated shows these days (that aren't Flash based), the bulk of the work is done overseas. In

this case, at the Seoul, Korea, facilities of Glendale-based Rough Draft Studios. (*The X's* is a 2D show with some CG elements layered on top. Storyboards, backgrounds and character design are done at Nickelodeon's Burbank animation HQ and the ink-and-paint in Korea.)

"The animation goes back and forth until everybody's happy," says Ramos. The coup de grace for the look of the show is the real effects that are added



to elements in certain scenes by CG supervisor Ernest Chan (*Invader Zim*). And there seems to be no secret global domination agendas involved, just winning the hearts and minds of TV viewers in the years to come. ■

The X's premieres with three back-to-back episodes on Nickelodeon on Friday, November 25 at 8 p.m.

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United States Postal Service
Statement of Ownership, Management and
Circulation

1. Publication Title Animation Magazine
2. Publication Number 1041-617X
3. Filing Date 10/24/05
4. Issue Frequency Monthly
5. Number of Issues Published Annually (12)
6. Annual Sub Price \$50.00
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication
30941 West Agoura Road Ste 102
Westlake Village, CA 91361
Contact Person Jan Bayouth 818-991-2884
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters
30941 West Agoura Road Ste 102
Westlake Village, CA 91361
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor
Publisher Jodi Bluth
30941 West Agoura Road Ste 102
Westlake Village, CA 91361
Editor Ramin Zahed
30941 West Agoura Road Ste 102
Westlake Village, CA 91361
Managing Editor
10. Owner Jean Thoren
30941 West Agoura Road Ste 102
Westlake Village, CA 91361
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgages and Other Security Holders
X NONE
12. Tax Status
The Purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:
X Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months

13. Publication Title Animation Magazine

14. Issue date for Circulation Data Below November 2005

15. Extent and Nature of Circulation
Average # Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months 15,449

Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date 11,545

b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation
Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541

4,096 3,015

Paid In-County Subscriptions
Sales Through Dealers Carrier, Street Vendors, Counter Sales and Other Non USPS Paid Distribution

4,568 4,730

d. Free distribution by Mail (1) Outside-County (2) in-County (3) Other Classes

c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation

8,664 7,745

d. Free distribution by Mail (1) Outside-County (2) in-County (3) Other Classes Mailed through USPS

e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail

5,771 3,050

f. Total Free Distribution

5,771 3,050

g. Total Distribution

14,435 10,795

h. Copies Not Distributed

1,016 1750

i. Total

15,451 11,545

j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation

60 % 71 %

16. Publication of Statement of Ownership
X Publication required. Will be printed in the DEC 2005. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager or Owner
Date Jean Thoren, Owner, 10.24.05

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Fresh Market Wrap

News and hot animated picks from the 21st MIPCOM TV mart in France. **by Ramin Zahed**

Last month's MIPCOM market in Cannes sent a clear signal to content creators all over the world. It's obviously a good time to invest in broadband and High Def business. The healthy future of the mobile universe and the multi-platforming of the entertainment business have opened new doors for the animation community, so it was great to see everyone wheeling and dealing on the Riviera. We wish we could write about all the cool animated projects in development, but here are a few news items and clever shows that caught our eyes:

Skateboard Paradise

We had a chance to catch up with Rick Mischel, the energetic president and CEO of Vancouver's **Mainframe Entertainment**, and he told us all about the new 70-minute DVD project **Tony Hawk in Boom Boom Sabotage**. "We are working with Tony in his skate park in Carlsbad," says Mischel. "We mo-cap him doing his own skate moves, as well as various other skateboard pros, and then using Mainframe's new 6,000-squarefoot mo-cap facility and Vicon systems, we translate his legendary skateboarding moves to animation. Our project really blends the best of 2D and CG, because some of the character designs are really stylized." The ton follows Hawk's Boom Boom Huck-Jam hero as he battles some evil carnie types. Designed for the eight-12 audience, the project is expected to be ready for fall 2006.



Future Stunner

It's official. **Method Films'** awesome sci-fi adventure series **Skyland** was a big hit at the market. Not only was the 26x26 animated show the most-viewed title by buyers at the Junior market, it also dazzled the crowds at the closing night event on the Majestic Hotel beach. Created by Emmanuel Gorin, Alexandre de la Patelliere and Matthieu Delaporte, this visually stunning toon follows the adventures of a brother and sister in the year 2251 as they search for their parents in a new world threatened by an evil force known as the Sphere. Nicktoons viewers will get a special sneak of the hour-long pilot on Friday November 25 at 8 p.m. (with an encore at 11 p.m.). France 2, Teletoon (Canada) and ABC (Australia) are also joining in the preview program. **Skyland** will then premiere on Nicktoons Network's 3 Headed Monster Block on Saturday, January 14, 2006 at 8 p.m.

Cross-Cultural Kicks

If you were looking for an example of a great multi-national co-venture, you would be smart to track down **Ōban Star-Racers**, the awesome sci-fi anime co-produced by **Jetix Europe** and **Sav! The World Productions** (led by creator/writer/director Savin Yeatman-Eiffel), with France 3, Super RTL, Bandai Visual and Hal Film Maker. Targeting kids age seven-12, the show is set to premiere on Jetix Europe in the fall of 2006, but MIPCOM attendees were able to get an early sneak of the show. The 26x30 serial is all about an intergalactic racing competition that takes place every 10,000 years to determine the winner of a mysterious and powerful prize. As Michael Lekes, senior VP of programming for Jetix Europe noted, "Ōban embodies the Jetix values of fantasy, adventure and action and delivers via the sort of sophisticated storytelling which today's kids are seeking. It breaks the mold of traditional action series on every level." Having seen the show's stunning mix of 2D and CG animation, we have to say we definitely share Lekes' enthusiasm for this brave, new world.



Revenge of the Nerds

It looks like the nerds are putting the final tweaks on their global domination plans. Asaph (Ace) Fipke, founder of Vancouver-based **Nerd Corps** and Ken Faier, the company's new president, were at the market showing off two killer projects. **Storm Hawks** (52x30) is a fast-moving action-packed show about a group of kids hot on the trail of some powerful crystals. Sporting a smooth CG look, which also borrows from the best of traditional animation styles, it has all the right ingredients to be the next big kids action show. Also on the Nerd plate is **Team Awethum**, a funny package about the misadventures of four well-meaning geeks bent on fighting off the forces of cool. "We are not looking to become a huge conglomerate," says Fipke. "We're not planning on becoming the next DIC. Our first impulse when we formed the company was 'Let's be geeks and love it.' We have an amazingly talented team, and what is important to us is creating good-looking animation in service of great scripts and ideas." So it is true. The nerds are inheriting the toon world after all.



Storm Hawks



He Sees Dead People

It's always a relief when a monster hunter finds a new home. That's what just happened to Zick, the 10-year-old hero of **Monster Allergy**, **Rainbow S.r.l.**'s fun toon about a kid who can see ghosts and monsters in everyday life. The show just found new partners in **Kids' WB!** and **Cartoon Network** which just signed on to air the first 26 episodes of the original property in the near future. "We are thrilled to have found the ideal home for our kid heroes and hilariously wacky monsters of *Monster Allergy*," says Iginio Straffi, director and founder of Rainbow S.r.l., which also produces the *Winx Club*. We hear every time a Euro toon finds a U.S. broadcaster, an angel earns his wings, or a witch gets some sort of a mole on her face. (We're not exactly sure which one!)

Top Ten Toons at Junior

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1. | Skyland [Millimages, Method Films] |
| 2. | Team Galaxy [Marathon Intl.] |
| 3. | Bali [AWOL, Planet Nemo] |
| 4. | Bernard [BRB Intl.] |
| 5. | Ben 10 [Warner Bros. Intl.] |
| 6. | Kappa Mikey [Animation Collective, MTVNI] |
| 7. | Captain Flamingo [Breakthrough Ent.] |
| 8. | Shuriken School [Xilam] |
| 9. | Curious George [NBC Universal TV] |
| 10. | Bruno and the Banana Bunch [AWOL, Cuppa Coffee Studios] |



Source: MIPCOM Jr. Most Screened List

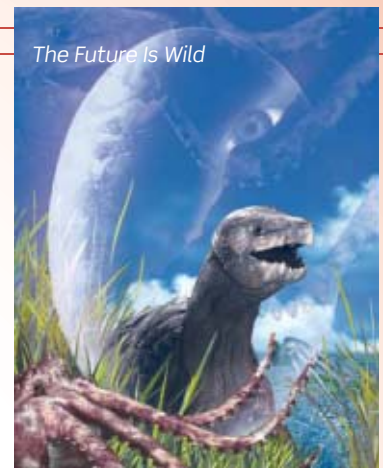
Yup, They're Kind of Busy!

We have no idea how they manage to focus on so many high-quality animated projects, but Canadian toon house **Nelvana** never ceases to amaze us with the quality and quantity of its slate during markets.

The Toronto studio was all over MIPCOM with its clever new toon **Spliced!** (about genetically mutant animals), **Di-Gata Defenders** (great looking action adventure about four heroes fighting diabolical villains via four pure—and very collectible—stones!) and **Jane and the Dragon** (the co-pro with New Zealand's Weta Workshop which has already been acquired by YTV, France 3, TVNZ and ABC Australia). MIPCOM attendees were also treated to a first-look at the new CG-version of that great elephant king, **Babar** and learned that **Ruby Gloom** and her pals are now in production with first episodes ready for delivery in early 2007. Nelvana also announced a strategic partnership with ST Electronics and the Media Development Authority of Singapore to produce

and distribute a CG-animated adventure show **The Future Is Wild**, which offers lessons in evolution as a group of teens travel millions of years forward in time! This is the beginning of a plan to produce and launch 10 direct-to-DVD and three animated series in the future. Wait, there's more.

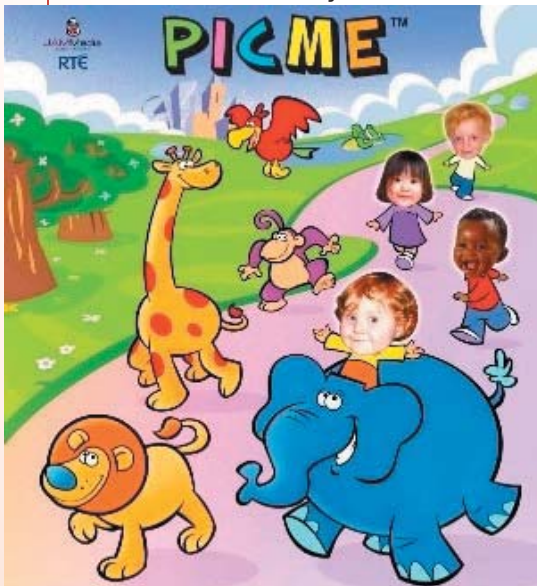
Nelvana's funny and educational 2D show **Grossology** just found a home on Discovery Kids in North America. Based on the books by Sylvia Branzie, the toon follows the oozing adventures of brother-and-sister team Ty and Abby Archer, two young criminologists with a knack for the gross and slimy side of science. We'd tell you more, but we'll have to save some material for future issues!



The Future Is Wild

Make Your Kid a Star!

It looks like Dublin-based **Monster Distributes** has a big hit on its hands. Thanks to its audience-friendly, interactive nature, the animated series **PICME** may have launched a whole new trend in toontown. The preschool show teaches basic concepts to viewers. However, the clever part of the package is that each five-minute episode stars a different child—based on a picture of a kid sent in by viewers to the broadcasters. The special PICME software allows the pictures to be part of the pre-made cartoons. Commissioned by RTE, the toon has already been sold to



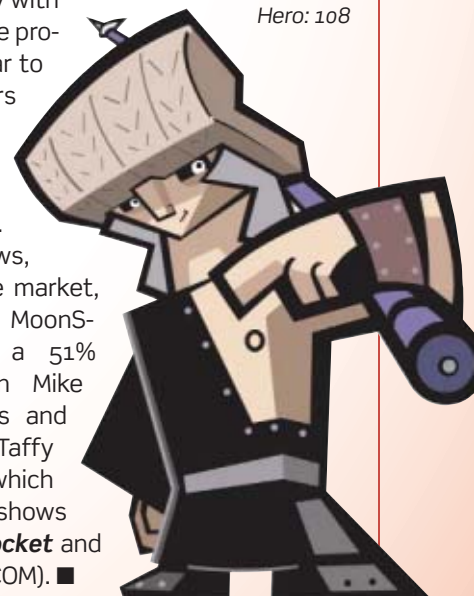
Nick UK, Aniamania US, KIKA Germany, Teletoon France, S4C Wales and Hungama TV India, Indonesia and Malaysia. Monster founder Andrew Fitzpatrick also had a good time selling his other blue-ribbon shows, which included *I'm An Animal*, *bro'Town*, *Bugtime Adventures*, *Hermie and Friends* and *Anthony Lucas'*

award-winning short, *The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello*. (We all hope this one will be a shoo-in for an Oscar nom this year!)

Heroic Efforts

Mike Young Productions was one of the big news-makers at the market as it signed a partnership with online game publisher Gamania Digital Ent. of Taiwan to co-produce the comedy-action toon **Hero:108**. *Animation Magazine's* former publisher, the amazing Rita Street, will exec produce through Radar Cartoons, the representation firm that handled Gamania's producers. Targeting kids 6-11, *Hero: 108* (22 x 30) is about the adventures of a group of kid defenders set on ending a conflict between animals and humans in a hidden kingdom. The show is based on the ancient Chinese novel *The Water Margin* and centers on Lin Chung (a.k.a. Panther Eye), a boy with special powers. The project may be familiar to Nicktoons viewers since it was introduced as a series of shorts on *Nicktoons Film Festival*.

In related MYP news, a week before the market, Paris-based house MoonScoop purchased a 51% majority stake in Mike Young Productions and its distrib arm Taffy Entertainment (which brought hot new shows such as *I Got a Rocket* and *El Corazon* to MIPCOM). ■



Hero: 108

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See Ya in the Suburbs, Suckas!

The Boondocks, Aaron McGruder's brilliant and irreverent comic strip, comes to animated life on [adult swim], offering a much-needed "foot in the ass of the man!"

by Ramin Zahed

Remember 1999? With Bill Waterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* and Gary Larson's *The Far Side* gone from the pages of newspapers, the comics pages were beginning to feel like a ghost town, populated with overly cute characters and stale ideas. Then, in April of that year, Aaron McGruder revolutionized the scene overnight with *The Boondocks*, his crisply drawn, hilarious and zeitgeist-savvy strip. Audiences warmed up to Huey and Riley, the two African-American inner city kids who moved to the suburbs with their granddad, an unlikely guardian with a lot of "crazy-ass-old-black-man" ideas (in the eyes of the boys!).

This month, late-night TV fans will finally get a chance to see the animated version of the strip as *The Boondocks* finds a home on the irreverent [adult swim] block on Cartoon Network. Produced by Rebel Base and Hudlin Entertainment in association with Sony Pictures Television, the envelope-pushing

toon has found its perfect home on [adult swim], a place where McGruder and company can fully explore the social and political dimensions of the characters without compromising their original visions. In the long run, some might say it was a good thing that FOX chickened out and passed on the project.

McGruder, who is heavily involved in the creation, production and writing of the show, says he definitely wanted the series to take full advantage of the possibilities of the medium. "I didn't want the show to be the same as the strip," he notes. "We did our best to deliver very lush animation and bring in a nice anime look. We looked long and hard at some of the other examples of animation out there, and we definitely didn't want the show to look like the Saturday morning American anime blend. I was very happy to see that we were able to achieve authentic anime style in many instances. Sure, we had to deal with cultural gaps and language problems [Korea's Dong Woo and Lotto studios also work on the show.], but we ended up with a very good-looking show, by



Aaron McGruder



Carl Jones

Photo credit:
Mike Clark, Sony Pictures Television
Kyle Christy



Courtesy: Sony Pictures Television

Courtesy: Sony Pictures Television

American standards!"

If McGruder sounds like someone who knows his anime stuff, it's because he does! Before attending the University of Maryland (where he got his B.A. in African-American studies), the man called "the most dangerous black man in America" by *USA Today*, worked at a comic-book store in Columbia. "As a kid, my biggest inspirations were *Star Wars* and the *Peanuts* comic strip," he says. "I was also a big fan of *Doonesbury*, *Bloom County*, and, of course, *Calvin and Hobbes*. I also thought anime titles like *Akira* were amazing."

One of the challenges of basing a TV show on the wonderfully topical strip was the production schedule. "Because it takes us about 15 months to go from script to delivery, we couldn't be too topical. But there were instances where we just rolled the dice and decided to use things that were in the news," says McGruder. "You'll notice that we have a storyline about the trial of singer R. Kelly and we actually wrote about it a year and a half ago and his trial is just coming up."

Also high on the list of priorities was making sure *The Boondocks* clan would not be the victims of the usual ho-hum patterns of the sitcom universe. "There's a really nice dream sequence in which Huey is fighting a blind samurai, which also involves a flashback to Granddad as a fighter pilot in World War II. In another episode, we have a plotline centering on Martin Luther King. He wakes up from a coma in 2001 [It's assumed that he wasn't



shot.], and then 9/11 happens, and he tells people to turn the other cheek, and because of that, America ends up hating him. Huey is the only one who shows up at his book signing!"

Of course, one of the guilty pleasures of the comic strip is McGruder's on-target satire of George W. Bush and his administration. Although the president doesn't make an



appearance in the toon series, there is a new character who might seem a bit similar to the former governor from Texas. "We have a character called Ed the Third (voiced by Charlie Murphy of *Chappelle's Show*), who's

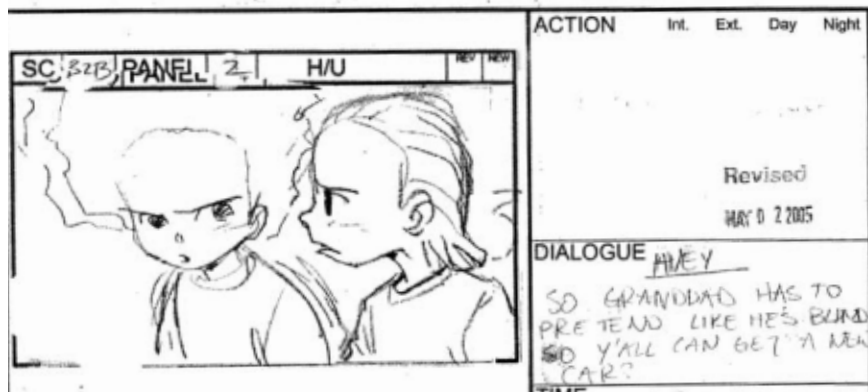
the grandson of a billionaire (voice of Ed Asner). He's just a real bad kid!"

Show producer Carl Jones, who actually helps draw the daily *Boondocks* strip, says he expects fans of the comic to be pleasantly surprised by the TV adaptation. "Once I actually saw what he wanted to do with the show, it blew my mind," he says. "Although the strip is more political, we are able to do a lot more with a 22-minute show. You get a lot of social issues as well as pop culture. You also get to know the characters a lot better and have a good feel for their personalities, their anxieties, their issues."

According to Jones, the animators did their best to make the series look as cinematic as possible. "Aaron is constantly trying to improve the show, but you can really compare the series to the popular anime titles and live-action films in its tone. I'm sure if we go to a second season, we'll experiment in mixing CG and 2D animation as well."

McGruder says he's hopeful that the series will lead to a feature project at Sony as well. Regardless of what happens to brothers Huey and Riley, their friends Michael and Jazmine and grumpy ol' Granddad, you can be absolutely positive about one fact in our uncertain world. When asked whether Michael Jackson will make a guest voice appearance on the show during sweeps, McGruder assures his fans, "That's an absolute lie!" ■

The Boondocks premieres on Cartoon Network at 11 p.m. on November 6.



The Padded Cel

The Coming Animation Pandemic



by Robby London

Author's Note: *On a recent backpacking trip to the desolate badlands of Beverly Hills, I made an amazing discovery. While picking organic money off of trees, I stumbled upon a remarkable artifact: a "reverse time capsule." It had been buried by a future generation and then, miraculously, sent backwards in time in shocking defiance of the space-time continuum and Robert's Rules of Order. The capsule contained some mind-boggling writings from the future which we will reprint from time to time as a new recurring feature of this column.*

Dateline: Secret Underground Bunker, December, 2009.

I'm here because there was no other place left to hide. This is the last place on earth where one can escape ... cartoons.

The irony is that I love animation. Not to mention that it has provided a stimulating and rewarding livelihood for my entire adult life. But sometime around 2005, something very strange started to happen. Animation began to mutate and spread. Its DNA transformed itself from "cartoons" to "content." No longer confined to television, movie theaters or even the Internet, it became mobile. Before anyone could react, it became airborne and emerged as a pandemic, circling the globe jumping from medium to medium.

First, in early 2005, it attached itself to cell phones. Classic animation which had been lovingly crafted was reduced to brief bursts on 2" screens, with half-inch speakers. (The male-perpetuated myth that size doesn't matter was conclusively debunked by a team of female researchers in early

2006.) Not merely reduced to microscopic size, these wonderful, timeless cartoons—into which writers, artists, actors and producers had poured their hearts, souls and marriages—were relegated to serving simply as one in a long list of momentary



Illustration by Mercedes Mulligan

diversions in the life of the attention-deficient multi-tasker.

Oh, don't get me wrong. It was great for business. Anytime a new market creates another paying outlet for animation, it helps to support a budget-challenged industry, keep animators employed and perpetuate the craft. But that doesn't mean I have to like it. Still, if it had stopped with cell phones, maybe it wouldn't have been so daunting.

But that was only the beginning.

The first video iPods were unveiled in October 2005. In 2007, appliances began to show animated "content." *Ice Age* was popular on refrigerators, *Finding Nemo* a big hit in bathtubs and several titles written by an obscure animation writer named Robby London were remarkably suited to the toilet.

A few years later, the field of "optomomation" was pioneered. Scientists attempted the first implant of a retinal chip capable of receiving animation and channeling it directly to the ocular nerve. The test subject, a chimp named Bushy, lost his ability to focus on a banana long enough to peel it and subsequently starved to death. But the autopsy revealed he was smiling inside. So, some years later, the first human trial was performed successfully on a prison volunteer serving life without parole for his role in a phony Canadian co-production tax-credit scheme.

(In a related event, Senator Bill Frist instructed his "blind trust" to buy stock in the patent-holder, so as to avoid conflict of interest.)

The rest, as they say, is history. From cradle to grave, from home to car to office, on every surface, every product and spanning all corners of the globe, it became all-animation, all the time. *Animation Magazine* became more influential than *The New York Times* and its columnists were the new sex symbols (size not withstanding). Is it any wonder I had to escape? ■

Robby London has worked in animation for more than 20 years as a writer, producer and executive.



It's a Wonderful Holiday Special, Mate!

A *Very Barry Christmas*, Cuppa Coffee's charming new stop-motion special, delivers a "Down Under" take on the holidays. by Ramin Zahed

No matter how much technology advances, TV viewers will always have a soft spot for good old-fashioned stop-motion animation. This fondness reaches unusual heights during the holidays, thanks to the nostalgic pull of those great Rankin-Bass chestnuts such as *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. This year, the brilliant team at Toronto-based studio Cuppa Coffee has delivered a new spin on the classic genre with *A Very Barry Christmas*, a 45-minute special that travels from the cold reaches of the North Pole to the exotic terrain of the Aussie outback.

The feel-good adventure centers on Barry Buckley, a well-intentioned fellow who cares for a misfit band of animals Down Under. Since this is a Christmas story, Barry and his mismatched marsupials find themselves involved in a Santa Claus switcheroo. Musical numbers, comedy and a happy stop-motion finale are all part of the agenda in this project, penned by Cuppa Coffee founder Adam Shaheen and Brendan Russell and directed by Andrew Horne.

For Horne, an Australian transplant who lives in Toronto, the whole "fish out of water" element of Aussie characters (who are used to the heat and don't get snow on Christmas) was a great premise for the tale. "It was truly a labor of love for all of us," he adds. "We came up with

a bunch of characters we thought were quite charming and funny. Then we threw in a good mix of culture clash jokes and traditional holiday elements as well as wonderful musical contributions by Adam Goddard."

Shaheen, whose studio is currently working on four stop-motion shows (*The Wrong Coast*, *Little People*, *Celebrity Death Match*) and two Flash series (*Bruno & The Banana Bunch*, *Tigga & Togga*), says the special was another instance of Cuppa Coffee jumping in and producing projects without having to wait for other studios and TV outlets to finance the production. "We financed the entire production, which cost about \$1.6 million Canadian dollars [\$1.3 million U.S.]," he notes. "We're based in Canada, so we have tax credit programs to help leverage the costs. We were able to move ahead with our long-form proprietary programs without having to rely on network commitments. However, now that people have seen the high quality of our productions, that tide is changing and financial commitments are made much earlier on in the development stages."

After fleshing out the script, the Cuppa Coffee team began working furiously on the project in the early part of 2004. Because the Toronto shop has 40 stop-motion studios, they were able to add the finishing touches by October,

and the show aired in Canada last year. Shaheen notes that, on average, they were producing anywhere from four to 12 seconds of stop-motion animation each day.

"We knew from day one that we wanted this project to be stop-motion," says writer Brendan Russell. "I grew up loving all the Rankin-Bass specials, and this type of animation really lends itself well to the genre. It's a tactile cinematic look, but it's not just a stylistic stamp. It has to be story-based."

For the show's director, the authentic feel of the production is what sets it apart from similar material. "There are other shows that are set in the Australia, but you can just tell that they are directed by North Americans," says Horne. "Many of them don't have an authentic flavor. We worked hard to convey a true Australian ambience. Of course, the part about the North Pole was all made up because none of us have been there!"

One of the key things about the special is that it is ideal for "co-viewing," this year's popular catch-phrase among TV insiders, which simply means shows that parents can watch with their kids without being bored stiff. "It was important that we create something that the whole family can sit down and watch," says Russell. "Not only does it make them laugh, kids can take something away from it and adults can watch it without rolling their eyes."

And if you find yourself falling for Barry and the jovial claymated characters in this Christmas special, Shaheen and company have some good news for you. "We are developing a caper kind of feature using some of the nice characters we introduced in the special," he says. "The thing to remember is that every production is a huge lesson. You keep learning and growing. Now that we have this wonderful project under our belt, people know that we have a business model that works, and that we are able to make great animated projects on budget and on time!" ■

Cuppa Coffee's *A Very Barry Christmas* airs on ABC this holiday season.



Adam Shaheen



Andrew Horne



Brendan Russell

TELEVISION

The Ultimate Animation Lover's Holiday Gift Guide

by Ramin Zahed

It's November and we're all scratching our heads trying to figure out how the first ten months of 2005 slipped through our fingers so quickly. It's also time to plan the appropriate animation-related gifts for loved ones, which will show them what a considerate kind of person we are.

The good news is that we've done your homework for you and picked several items that will make people realize that you put a lot of thought into selecting that special gift. And if they don't like your gift, claim it as your own and drop the ungrateful ones from the list next year, OK?

Terrific Tablets

Talk to any animator for a given length of time, and sooner or later, he or she is bound to sing the praises of Wacom's tablets. The benefits of using an interactive pen with a cordless, battery-free tablet are quite obvious. The new **Cintiq 21UX** combines the intuitiveness of pen and paper, with the ability to undo, redo and create different layers. The new model's grip pen has 1,024 levels of tip and eraser pressure sensitivity, and the 21.3" LCD offers UXGA resolution (1600x1200). Although the older **Cintiq 17SX** doesn't have some of the key features of the new model (such as the larger display, the ExpressKeys, the Touch Strips or the high-res tablet and sensitive controls), it's still a great tool for presentations, digital documents, filling out e-forms and general cursor control with direct pen-to-screen applications. Here's the tough part: The new model sets you back about \$2,500 while the 17SX can be purchased for \$1,799. It all boils down to how much money you have left in your wallet after paying for gas at the pump! For more info, visit www.wacom.com/lcdtablets.



LICENSING

Scaling Claymation Heights

It's a sign of the times that our great claymation friends from yesteryear, Davey and Goliath, are getting more multicultural in their treatment of the holidays. In the new DVD special **Davey and Goliath's Snowboard Christmas** (Starlight Home Entertainment, \$16.99), our pals put on their mittens and scarves and meet two new friends who teach them about Hanukkah and Ramaddan. Produced by Clokey Productions and spearheaded by Joe Clokey (son of original creators Art and Ruth Clokey), this timely stop-motion adventure carries the meticulous artistic stamp of the familiar show. That means they still use 24 still frames to make only one second of family fun. Overall, it's a great way to be both nostalgic and progressive at the same time.



Halloween 2005 Top Kids' Costumes

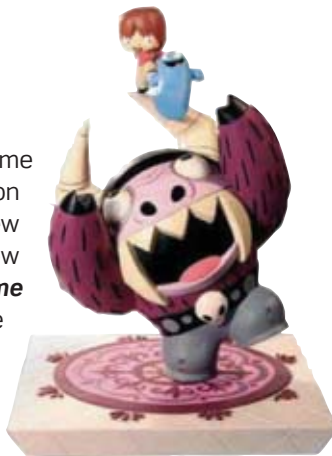


Costume	Percentage	Number of Children
1. Princess	11.8%	3,778,217
2. Witch	5.2%	1,664,215
3. Spider-man	4.5%	1,439,321
4. Monster	4.1%	1,304,385
5. Darth Vader	3.9%	1,259,406
6. Superhero	3.9%	1,259,406
7. Star Wars Character	2.5%	809,618
8. Batman	2.4%	764,639
9. Ninja	2.3%	719,660
10. Clown	2.3%	719,660

Source: National Retail Foundation Survey

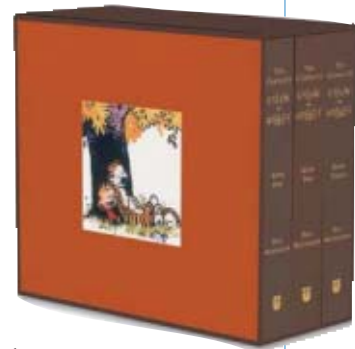
Bedside Table Buddies

Ever since Craig McCracken's awesome animated series premiered on Cartoon Network in August of 2004, it set new standards for Flash-animated shows. Now you can have a little piece of **Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends** to give as a collectible gift this season. The limited-edition, hand-painted porcelain statue of Blooregard, Mac and Eduardo is about nine inches tall, eight inches wide and six and a inches deep: It is the kind of item that will delight both die-hard animation aficionados and young fans, but because it costs about \$90, we'd save it for the ones on your list who rate higher than others! To order, visit www.cartoonnetwork.com.shop.



Never Forget Your Pet Tiger

Just walk into any book store this time of year, and you will be amazed by the number of cool art books and toon-related material on display. However, there were several titles that simply made us weep with joy and gratitude. Any comic-book lover on your list will drool for Andrews McMeel Publishing's three-volume (1,440-page) **The Complete Calvin and Hobbes**. Frankly, it's hard to find anything more glorious than this collection of Bill Watterson's syndicated strip, 1985-1994, in stores this year. As fellow artist Art Spiegelman noted in *Publisher's Weekly*, "There's something poignant about the artist's hopeless struggle to work within the confines of mass culture while simultaneously critiquing it. These books offer a testa-



ment to Watterson's dedication and to the medium's ability to keep reinventing itself against all odds." Although the tome is listed for \$150, you can snap it up for \$94.50 on amazon.com.

British Charmers

So you saw the new *Wallace & Gromit* movie and fell in love with Nick Park's brilliant plasticine characters all over again. We can think of a few ways you can put the sharp inventor and his taciturn beagle on your gift-giving list. First up, there's a great DVD collection titled **Wallace & Gromit in Three Amazing Adventures**. W&G's previous escapades, *A Grand Day Out*, *The Wrong Trousers* and *A Close Shave*, are included in this package as are the ten mini-episodes of *Cracking Contraptions*. The first season of Aardman's popular TV show ***Creature Comforts***, which aired on the BBC in 2003, makes the perfect companion DVD. Both titles are available for \$19.99 each. You will also have tons of fun searching for the perfect toy on the Aardman Toy store online (www.aardman.com). Not only can



you get your own **Gromit Sofa Remote Holder**, there are things such as **Were-Rabbit Hands** and **Shaking Rabbits** to keep you smiling all through the stressful holiday season.



Under Harry's Spell

There's so much buzz surrounding the new Harry Potter movie, which unspools in theaters this month, it's hard to concentrate on all the other cool items that can take us back to Hogwarts Academy. If questions such as "What spell does Hermione use to fix Harry's glasses?" or "How many eyes does The Monster Book of Monsters

have?" get you going, then we strongly recommend the new Mattel/Screenlife **Scene It? The Harry Potter Edition** interactive DVD game (\$39.99). You can enjoy scenes from all four HP movies and revisit Harry, Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, Dumbledore, Buckbeak and others. The 160 question cards come in three categories (Hogwarts, Wizarding World and Muggles) and the All Play puzzles include Colin's Camera, Hagrid's Hut and Polyjuice Puzzle. In short, you'll have to be a real Snape to not fall for this addictive game.



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LICENSING

Putting on the Cat

Ever since the resourceful black and white cat with the giant grin made its first appearance in 1919, Felix the Cat has been a delightful fixture of pop culture all over the world. So it's no surprise that 85 years later, the fantastic feline hasn't lost any of his original appeal. We know Otto Messmer/Pat Sullivan's classic

character has numerous tie-ins and licensees, but sometimes, a simple T-shirt featuring the smiling Felix can do wonders for one's wardrobe! You can order your favorite cotton **Felix tees** (\$21.95) on www.characters.com.

There's the blue one featuring him cussing out his shadow, the tan version with his face popping out of a star or the one showcasing his "Righty O" catch-phrase. Either way, you can't lose with this first real cartoon star of the TV era.



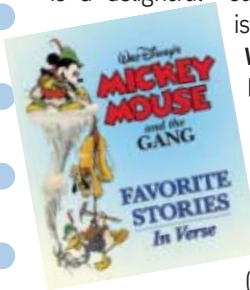
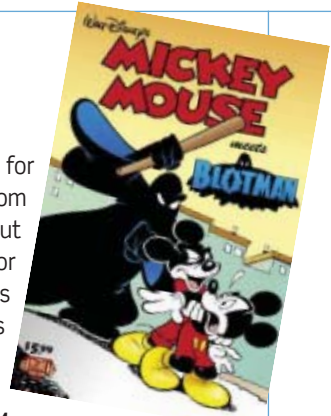
No Christmas Without Scrooge (or Mickey)

Some graphic novel fans may flip for the latest angst-ridden work from avant-garde expressionist artists, but we like to plunk our money down for good old-fashioned Disney adventures published by the perfectionist folks at **Gemstone Publishing**. This holiday season, there's a plethora of titles to pick from. You can go for **Mickey Mouse**

Meets Blotman, a wonderful 48-page paperback (\$5.99) which finds our famous hero lost in another dimension, where his inventor pal Doc Static is a criminal genius and old arch-foe The Phantom Blot is an action hero. The secret identity of Blotman is a delightful surprise, by the way. The pièce de résistance is **Mickey and The Gang, Classic Stories in Verse**, a gorgeous 360-page coffee table

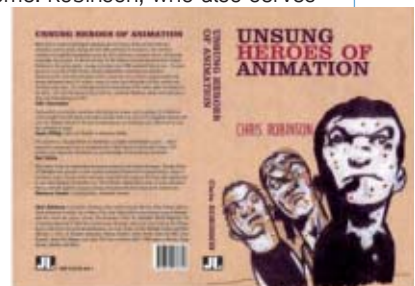
book, which contains all 124 stories of the story pages that originally appeared in *Good Housekeeping* magazine from 1934 to 1944. Each page is illustrated in watercolor by Disney artists Tom Wood and Hank Porter. The hardback version (which includes ten large foldouts) carries

a \$149 price tag (ouch), but there's also a \$29.99 paperback edition for the more financially challenged holiday shoppers! And don't forget about the publisher's classic monthlies such as **Walt Disney's Comics & Stories** and **Uncle Scrooge**, which can be yours at \$83.40 for 12 issues. Call us old-fashioned, but nothing tops those timeless Uncle Scrooge adventures, which were created by Carl Barks back in the 1940s.



Indie Scene Chronicles

In this day and age where greedy multinational corporations loom over most of pop culture creations, it's wonderful to see a fantastic book devoted to the artists who are revolutionizing the face of 21st century animation with their exquisitely crafted labors of love. Noted animation critic and historian Chris Robinson's **Unsung Heroes of Animation** (Indiana University Press) pays homage to the likes of Ryan Larkin, The Brothers Quay, George Griffin and Igor Kovalyov in his beautifully composed tome. Robinson, who also serves as the artistic director of Ottawa's International Festival of Animation and has been called "a modern day Vasari," has done a great service to the brilliant animators whose personal and challenging art delights festival-goers around the world year after year.



Playing with Aslan

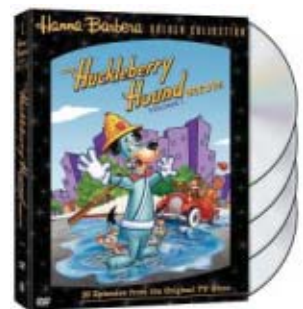
Disney is hoping this will be a big winter for C.S. Lewis and his magical world of **Narnia**. We know that **Weta Collectibles** is releasing a glorious line of statuettes in time for the holidays. In addition, **Buena Vista Games** is unleashing a tie-in game developed by the kids at Traveller's Tales, who also worked on the killer LEGO Star Wars offering. The **Xbox** release offers



a cooperative buddy system that allows gamers to control one of several different characters and combine attacks with other characters on-screen. It also features an at-will multiplayer system that lets players jump in and out of the game at their discretion. There are also compatible versions for PS2, GameCube, Nintendo DS, PSP, Game Boy Advance and the PC. We're sure the author never imagined his Christian allegory would generate so much material interest in 2005! As one Hollywood exec put it, "Just think of it as *Passion of the Christ* for kids!"

Picnic Basket Not Included

Yeah, yeah, we know all about love, family and the whole Peace on Earth message of the holiday season. But what we're *really* thrilled about this year is the release of two amazing collections of Hanna-Barbera classics on DVD this month. It's hard not to drool over the glorious four-disc **The Yogi Bear Show** collection, which features 33 complete remastered episodes of the hugely popular cartoon which debuted in 1960. A great perk is the inclusion of the famous birthday episode, which features appearances by Snagglepuss, Yakky Doodle, Quick Draw McGraw, Augie Doggie, Doggie Daddy, Pixie, Dixie and Mr. Jinks. Warner Bros. is also releasing the first volume of **The Huckleberry Hound Show** on DVD, with 26 episodes of the fun show featuring the blue pooch with the Southern drawl. Each DVD has an official price tag of \$44.98, but if you go on Amazon, you can buy each title for \$31.49. Or you can take advantage of their great buy-both-titles offer for \$62.98 and rewind your personal DVD time clock back to the sixties.



LICENSING

Catch Some iZs!

Every holiday season, some brilliant mind comes up with a techno-toy that blows everything else out of the park. This year, we have the glorious and musically gifted **iZ**, courtesy of Roger Schiffman—the same man who gave us the Furby a couple of decades ago! The cool nine-inch-tall gizmo may look like Gonzo's intergalactic cousin, but he is as music-savvy as Moby. You can twist his ears to start one of seven different rhythm tracks, and then twist it one more time to bring in vocals, chirps and beeps. You can even jack an MP3 player to its rear to play your own tunes. Available in blue, green and red, our new friend has a two-inch speaker in

his belly, and the younger kids will definitely get a kick out of the rude noises he makes after dinner. The poseable iZ can add scratches to his tunes, will stand on any single leg, and has expressive eyes that move independently to the music. (Let's see Shakira do that!) Plus, he can be yours for \$40 at www.zizzle.com, which is a lot less than any live musician charges per gig these days. ■





Keeping A Glam Heroine in Flux

Digital Domain makes life a bit easier for actress Charlize Theron in the live-action feature version of *Aeon Flux*. by Ron Magid

TV's influential 1995 animated series, *Aeon Flux*, makes it to the big screen with much visual imagination and dramatic flair courtesy of director Karyn Kusama and 250-plus nifty effects shots. Of course, Digital Domain's team, headed by co-visual effects supervisors Jonathan Egstad (*I, Robot*) and David Prescott (*The Day After Tomorrow*) was hugely responsible for aiding the movie's lead actress, Charlize Theron in her battles against the evil forces, as well as the artists at San Francisco and L.A. house The Orphanage, who also contributed to the film.

While forging its own celluloid identity, it is amazing just how much CG animation goes into translating the adventures of Peter Chung's *Heavy Metal*-style adult heroine from cartoon to live action. Much of DD's work involved creating outlandish locales, from the walled city of Bregna, where killer trees forever encroach, to an unusual library that disguises a more sinister laboratory in a parallel dimension. Among the most challenging of these environments was the orbiting Relical, a blimp-like ship with trailing banners which houses a dreadful secret. "The people understand that the Relical is a monument," says Prescott. "But a lot of the story is Aeon figuring out what the Relical actually is and how to get inside where a darker secret is revealed."

In fact, creating Aeon's entry into the Relical would be an ongoing theme throughout the entire production. "While we were shooting, we were developing digital Aeon, her hair and dynamics," Egstad says. "The sequence was always being worked on in some manner, whether it was pre-viz or honing digital Aeon or the environment."

The zeppelin-shaped Relical with banners trailing like tendrils provided its own challenges, particularly at night, when the craft was dramatically self-illuminated. "Getting the aesthetic of the hard surface was difficult, but the bigger technical challenge was creating the digital Aeon climbing on the banners," Prescott explains. "We were supposed to do distance shots, but they were not able to get as much live-action footage of Charlize on the banners as they wanted, so it got a little more challenging than we'd ever hoped it would be."

"A few weeks into working on the show, [producer] Gale Anne Hurd asked us if there was anything more that we could come up with on the sequence and put Aeon in a little more peril," Egstad recalls. "We worked with our pre-vis animators and quickly put a sequence together that incorporated many of the original boards and also some shots that had the potential of using a CG Aeon."

The sequence begins with Aeon leaping

from a towering spire in the Bregna government complex onto one of the Relical's trailing banners. "While the whole idea of her jumping onto the banner and climbing up into the Relical was all conceptually there, we went through a couple of iterations editing the exact flow of one shot to another," Prescott adds. "Then what we couldn't shoot of Charlize on the banners determined which of the shots would become CG."

But the real Charlize Theron—a very talented athlete besides being an Oscar-winning actress—injured herself after only a few weeks of shooting in Berlin and was unable to do as much of her stunts as originally expected. "They initially didn't feel there was a need for too much digital Aeon work, and they were right because Charlize has a strong dance background and has a phenomenal sense of her body and space—until she hurt herself," Prescott says. "After she hurt herself, she was laid up for some time, during which we realized that if the show were going to carry on there would be a need for a digital Charlize. We thought we were going to have to do a huge amount of work, so we had Charlize come in and scanned her. We went the whole gamut, from texturing right up to an extreme closeup, on digital Aeon."

"When we came back from the break, after the injury, we were expecting to do a lot more," Egstad adds, "but Charlize was actually able to do quite a bit—not drastic stunts, but fight moves, things like that."

Here director Kusama's instruction that Aeon was not a true superhero helped. "Aeon could do things we couldn't, but she couldn't fly or any of the things that we associate with superheroes today," Prescott says. "When filming resumed, Charlize could do a lot more

than what everyone was even hoping for. Much of it involved complex wire work, and to watch her pull that off was pretty amazing.”

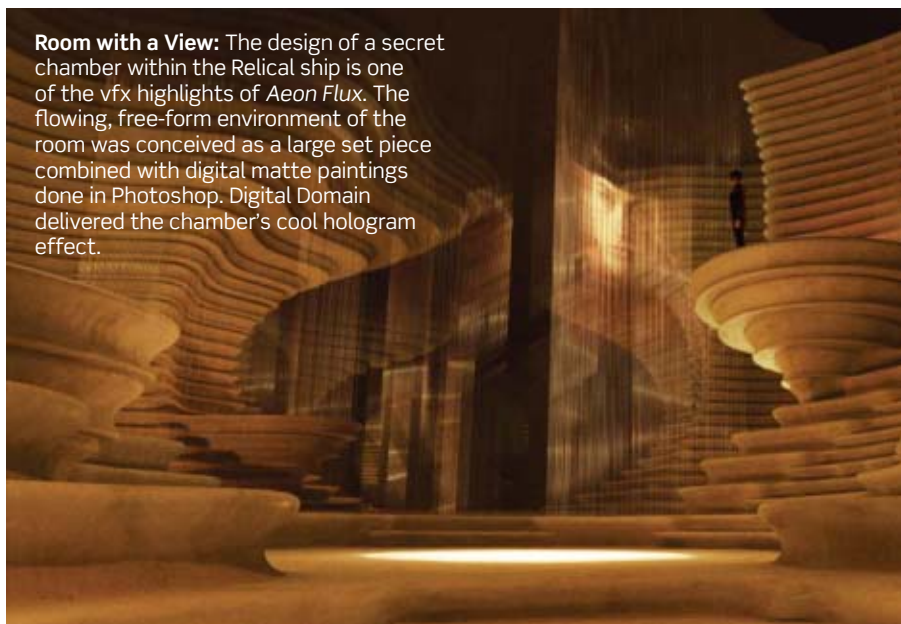
“Karyn would have her jump two times as far as we could jump, not twenty times as far as we could jump,” Egstad says. “It was that kind of thing where you knew we were stretching it.”

After leaping onto a 20' section of banner against greenscreen, Theron would hang upside down, then do forward flips. Since the banner had to appear many times longer on screen, DD's artists used Theron's feet and hands as natural breaks to disguise the join to their digital cloth. The digital Aeon was modeled and animated in Maya. Her performance was never motion captured—the character was entirely hand-animated from motion studies of Theron. But her hair and gravity-defying costume, which were achieved with simulations, proved problematic.

“Getting the proper sheen to the spandex and the way the light wraps around the sides of it was a bit of fun,” Prescott admits. “But most of the work we actually spent on getting her hair to flow correctly, especially when she's flying through the air. We used a mixed bag of tricks to get it to work: lots of photographic reference of Charlize to mimic the nature of her hair, as well as a third-party and proprietary simulation software. We had our CG supervisor Darren Hendler and character lead Dave Hodgins do all these tests in closeup early on and it looked incredible, so on the day we needed to use it, we were prepared.”

Once inside the Relical, Aeon discovers

Room with a View: The design of a secret chamber within the Relical ship is one of the vfx highlights of *Aeon Flux*. The flowing, free-form environment of the room was conceived as a large set piece combined with digital matte paintings done in Photoshop. Digital Domain delivered the chamber's cool hologram effect.



a golden honeycombed chamber filled with glistening vertical strands stretched floor to ceiling like harp strings. The visually stunning design was achieved in collaboration between Prescott, Egstad and supervising art director, John Frankish, in Berlin, while compositing supervisor Sonja Burchard and lead Joe Farrell worked on the look of the hologram effect back at Digital Domain.

“The interior was undefined, so we got involved in that early on,” Prescott says. “John and his staff in Berlin were very open to us working with them and helping to design various elements that would translate into the 3D world correctly. The original design was just kind of a big bowl. We came up with modifications on the steps and the other

design elements working with John, then they illustrated a couple of quick sketches as to how they wanted the matte paintings to look.”

The flowing, free-form step-like environment was mostly conceived as a large set piece combined with digital matte paintings executed in Photoshop. “We had to see it from so many different views, it ended up having to be 3D,” Egstad says.

Activating the Jules Verne-esque machinery, 3D images of multiple human heads form as what appear to be shimmering stacks of gold coins sequence up and down between the wires. “She's calling a research group up,” Prescott explains. “The Relical is where they store all the DNA, so we were trying to represent DNA sequencing—the look of DNA stacking up on itself. We always kept the light moving across the strands, and the 2D aspect was fun from the standpoint of trying to balance how much that light moved and how much it didn't. We wanted to come up with a different kind of holographic computer vision than we've seen before.”

When asked if the golden strands themselves were practical, Prescott states, “The foreground strands here are real.” Then he suddenly hesitates. “Wait, not on this one—these are all CG!”

It's a safe bet that when immersed in the digital fantasia of *Aeon Flux*, audiences won't know what's real or imagined either. ■

Paramount's *Aeon Flux* opens in theaters on December 2, 2005.





State of the Art

Satan's Little Helpers

Burbank-based Captive Audience used a multitude of clever CG tricks to create the demons in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. by Barbara Robertson

The question is from Industrial Light & Magic's Sebastien Moreau: "Who did the scary f/x of people's faces changing into demons in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and how did they do it?"

The Screen Gems horror thriller directed by Scott Derrickson tells the story of an attorney (Laura Linney) defending a priest (Tom Wilkinson) on trial for the homicide of a young girl named Emily Rose, who had believed she was possessed.

Creating her demons were Michael Shelton, visual effects supervisor, and the crew at Burbank, Calif.-based Captive Audience, the Oscar winning makeup effects house whose first visual effects project was *The Passion of Christ*.

"We were given a blank canvas by the director," says Shelton. "Our only rule was to respect the aesthetic of the film. He wanted things based in reality. No oogity boogity monster faces. They could be hallucinations. Maybe a weird shadow across a face. We wanted to respect the audience's imagination—except for

the kid in the classroom. No one would mistake gunk pouring out of a kid's eyes for a shadow."

All told, a crew of 15 people handled nearly 200 effects shots of which around 40 were demonic digital makeups and enhancements. They used Maya for 3D modeling and animation, PF Track for tracking, PhotoShop for painting, Mental Ray for 3D rendering and Shake for compositing.

The demons arrive in increasingly dramatic fashion. The first is simply a face in the clouds seen through a window, although the face was not simple to create. It was particularly important because it sets the stage: The audience sees Emily's reaction (as a reflection in the window) during the event. After that, the audience sees her react only after a ghoul has appeared. To create the shot, the crew removed greenscreen, without removing Emily's reflection, from a window filmed on a set in Vancouver. Then, they painted a face into clouds in PhotoShop, composited that behind Emily's reflection in Shake and added lightning flashes. "This

shot had the greatest possibility of looking quite terrible," says Shelton. "Thankfully, we nailed it."

Next, she sees a face on a window. "The face breathes itself onto the window as if someone had blown on a cold window and fogged it," says Shelton. For this, Rob Ostir painted a ghoulish face that he watered down and fogged with Maya particles to create raindrops and condensation.

Then, the demonic presences ramp up: Emily sees people transform, which meant the crew at Captive Audience began altering the faces of actors in plates. The gunky-eyed kid was first.

"The concept was that his eyes would darken and fill with black evil sludge that would pour down his face," says Shelton. "We did a motion pass on his face, tracked that, cre-

ated a tear shape and then ran a particle simulation down his face." Compositors layered the rendered particles onto his face in Shake and added reflections.

After Emily sees evil leaking from her classmate's eyes, she runs outside and confronts, one after another, a ghoul in the backseat of a passing car, demonic people under an umbrella and screaming, fiendish crones in a church. "We called it the gauntlet of terror," Shelton says.

The backseat ghoul wore makeup – a pull-over mask that the visual effects crew softened and distorted to match the style of the digital demons. "It's raining, so we softened and obscured it to look like water had hit your eye and blurred the image," Shelton says.

Next, the people under the umbrella. They walk toward Emily and start screaming, and as they scream, their faces change into demonic manifestations. For this shot, the crew created the transformations as animated matte paintings that were tracked to the faces and warped in Shake.

"In the theater, you'll think you saw something, but you won't be sure what you saw because it's so quick," says Shelton. "Even so, we took great care to make certain that if you frame advance through the transition on a DVD, it will still look seamless."

To alter these faces and those of the women in the church in the following shots, Shelton began with a sketch. "Once I've gotten the footage, I bring frames into PhotoShop and roughly sketch something I think will look



interesting," he says. "I pick frames where the expression is at its peak, at the highest point of emotion. If the person is screaming, I look for the mouth at its widest point. Then I do a quick concept piece and consider what I need to get it here from normal. I reverse engineer it and decide whether I can achieve it in 2D or if I need to do it in 3D."

As he creates the concept art, Shelton, who was a traditional make-up artist for 10 years, considers what he calls "attachment points." "I look for interesting things happening to their faces as the foundation for the digital makeup. It's almost like what I'd look for if I were creating a makeup appliance," he says.

For example: "One woman had interesting eye sockets," he said, "so I thought that when she squinted, I could build something over the eyebrow to make her look sinister."

Then, he picks the frames he'll use for the transition. For the umbrella people, he targeted the point when they open their mouths and start screaming. "By the time you're aware that they're screaming, the effect is fully brought on," he says. "It helps that their faces are masked by the rain."

It also helped that they walked straight at the camera and there was no perspective shift, so he could work in a 2D plane. The crew disfig-

ured the faces in PhotoShop and tracked the paintings onto the faces in Shake. Then, they used the spline-based warper in Shake to animate the paintings. Because the camera was hand-held, it was raining and the people were moving, the shot was forgiving enough that the crew could change each face uniformly.

Not so for the church women.

"The effect really had to be solid," Shelton says. "The camera was locked off and focused right on them, so we had to put more effort into hiding the transition." They did this by starting the transitions in different parts of their faces at different times using a combination of matte paintings and 3D textures. "You might focus on their eyes getting a mucous membrane while I bring up the distortion in another part of the face," he says.

Shelton used 3D textures for this shot because he wanted extra distortion and because one of the women moved, which caused a perspective shift. Again, he pulled the design from the women's anatomies. "When they screamed, they gave me so much to work with," he says. He warped some areas, distorted others, changed colors and sometimes built 3D pieces to enhance the faces further.

"I took what their faces were doing when they were all scrunched up and based the

effect on that," he says. "They had wrinkles and nice shadows across their faces that let me hide extra rows of teeth." To drive veins that popped out he used 3D models of the actors' heads and distorted the image on their foreheads with a bump map using a ramp shader.

In addition to demons, the digital effects crew disfigured Emily's body during exorcisms and augmented Captive Audience's onset Emily makeup, rebuilt backgrounds, created digital rain and replaced windows in a bar.

"This was an exciting project because it was about the art," Shelton says. "We were left alone. Most of the time you don't get that freedom."

Now, Shelton's question: *Digital Domain's work on Stealth in my opinion showcases the most seamless integration of visual effects work in a film to date. My question is about the "ring of fire" in the sky. How much of it was the dynamics system compared to practical fire, and was the effect initially planned as a practical effect?* ■

Barbara Robertson is an entertainment journalist who specializes in computer graphics, animation and vfx. If you have a State of the Art question, email Barbara at brobertson@animationmagazine.net.

VISUAL EFFECTS



DIGITAL MAGIC



Putting character builders in the spotlight

by Chris Grove

The economics of the f/x business being what they are (hazardous), if you're a company with terabytes of computing power, brain power and talent you may want to think about diversifying and leveraging all that firepower into the business of creating characters and digital creatures. As f/x work has become the province of the many in the past decade (with ever-cheaper hardware and software), the real money is in inventing distinctive and proprietary digital characters and creatures. Just ask the folks at Sony Pictures Imageworks.



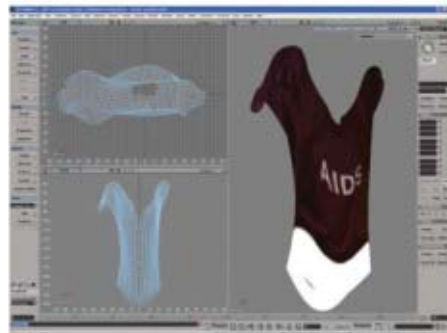
Dan Taylor

Such is the case with the sturdy f/x factory of Los Angeles based-Digital Domain, whose execs signaled their intentions late this past summer by hiring former ILM animation director Dan Taylor (*The Day After Tomorrow*, *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, *Mighty Joe Young*). "It's no secret that Dan is one of the premiere animation directors in the industry today," DD CEO Scott Ross said in August. "Dan's work on *Jurassic Park* and his leadership at ILM over the last decade sets him apart as one of the greats."

So how's it going so far? "Because Digital Domain is a smaller company, I can have more influence on what we're doing here," says Taylor. Super-sized ILM, by necessity, is a highly structured and compartmentalized place. Any large organization needs that to avoid chaos and operate efficiently. In fact, says Taylor, film projects were often so big at ILM that the teams working on them became de facto mini-companies within the company. At DD meanwhile, an individual artist can be more of an all-court player, engaging in the process at many different points. "I like the garage-band mentality of smaller companies. I can keep my hand in doing some animation and modeling at the same time as I'm supervising a whole project."

Taylor's addition to the company is expected to reap benefits continuing the expansion of DD's character animation capabilities. The studio is

committed to build upon the tools and pipeline created for the animation work previously done on *I, Robot* (nominated for a best visual effects Oscar). Taylor says the company is currently gearing up to bid on the creative work for a number of projects. "We're well-positioned to do a lot more character work," he says. And as with most things



Timely Message: Helsinki-based Rinko Productions relied on Softimage|XSI and SyFlex to create the effective AIDS awareness spots sponsored by the U.N.

in a highly competitive business, given a certain level of talent, it's a numbers game. "You bid on 20 and you're doing really well if you get two of them," Taylor says with a laugh.

Nice work if you can do it. No one begrudges a person for making a living using their talents to help people sell clothes, cars or snacks. But, if it's not chicken soup for the soul, it is gratifying when cutting edge technology can be used to sell the world on saving itself. Case in point: Helsinki, Fin-

land-based Rinki Production Ltd., recently was hired by production company Also Starring to create effects for some United Nations-sponsored spots raising awareness of AIDS and HIV around the world. In many African nations such as Nigeria, for example, AIDS is epidemic partially because of a lack of knowledge about condoms as one defense against transmission of the virus. The UN spot Rinki worked on features a couple wearing T-shirts with "AIDS" on one and "HIV+" on the other. When they touch each other, they disintegrate into a pile of dust. Their shirts follow them to the ground.

Rinki is a seven-man operation, so having off-the-shelf tools such as Softimage|XSI is a must. "We use XSI for productions that require pre-visualization and to make demo versions of the scenes and effects," says visual f/x artist Atte Nurminen. "The whole package is so solid, the animation capabilities in particular." Nurminen also took advantage of the cloth simulator SyFlex plug-in to get the results he wanted. Rinki had a week to turn the project around. Going back to basics, they used camera projections to ensure an invisible transition from the real shirts worn by the actors to the 3D CGI shirts. They created a cloth simulation using SyFlex to achieve a natural "collapse" of the shirts. "The subdivision surfaces tools make modeling faster and there's no guessing the outcome," Nurminen continues. Once he was able to match the shape and position of the real and simulated shirts, he was able to weave the two together and the illusion was achieved. "It was pretty simple really. The only thing that took some time was finding the right slow-motion movement to make it look real." With that accomplished the shirts slumped to the ground.

The spots are initially scheduled to play on BBC World, CNN and many local channels in Asia and Eastern Europe. You can see the ad at thinksaids.com ■

Chris Grove is a Los Angeles-based journalist specializing in visual effects. If you have any tips or suggestions for his monthly Digital Magic column, you can e-mail him at edit@animationmagazine.net.

Tech Review Corner

by Chris Tome

Adobe Photoshop CS2

All right! Font previews! Okay this review is done. Well not really, but man, if you work at all with type in Photoshop, this one feature alone makes the upgrade worth it. The new version of Photoshop actually shows you a preview of the fonts in the font list, a missing facet which has been something I have bitched about for years. I used to keep

Aside from the totally awesome (and overdue) type preview feature, there are many things to like about Photoshop CS2 which are much more revolutionary. One of the greatest new



features for anyone who uses vector images (or even pixel-based ones) inside Photoshop is the Smart Objects option, which gives you powerful control for scaling images without the aliasing problems found in previous versions. This maintains the integrity of the graphics and "smart scales" the image, be it vector- or raster-based, and works very well.

Another "Wow!" type tool is the Vanishing Point feature new to CS2. Vanishing Point lets you clone, paint and match given parts of an image using an easily defined perspective grid, and when combined with the power of the Healing Brush, it can do remarkable things to images with a speed that is simply mind blowing. This takes image editing

Another feature I have long wished for has finally arrived: the addition of multiple-layer control. With CS2 you can select, move, distort and transform multiple layers much like you'd do in a vector program by simply click dragging to select the objects (layers) you wish and performing whatever actions you wish to all layers at once.

For the truly geeky of our readers, CS2 now supports the RAW camera format as well as 32 bit HDR (High Dynamic Range) images, and both are valuable to photographers and 3D artists alike. The HDR support is particularly valuable. And the implementation is really good, albeit somewhat simplistic. If you don't know what RAW or HDR is, you probably



Illustrator or CorelDraw open just to peruse fonts, which I no longer need to do.

Adobe Photoshop Creative Suite 2 (CS2) contains a suite of programs, from Photoshop, to Illustrator, GoLive, InDesign and Acrobat Professional, but I intend to focus this review primarily on Photoshop. Why? It isn't that the other apps aren't good, but for this audience Photoshop is really the most important, and I also have some "issues" with the other programs across the board. One thing that negates my feelings on this, however, is if you're working in a large creative business with multiple people doing different things, the Adobe CS2 suite of tools becomes much more valuable due to things like file transfer capabilities and powerful features like Adobe Version Cue. This review is more for an animator who uses Photoshop for a variety of purposes, from creating texture or background plates to doing clean up, titling, etc.

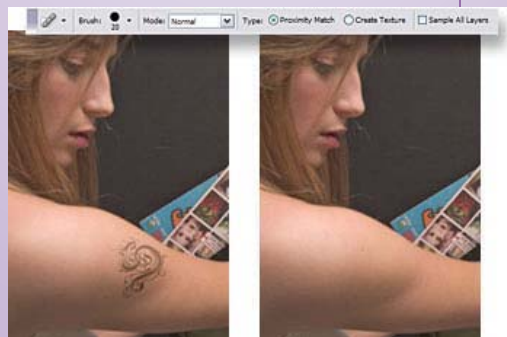


won't care, but for those who do, it's a big step forward.

The new Spot Healing brush is cool, as is the red-eye reduction capability. Advanced noise reduction filters, customizable menus and interfaces and so much more make for all the more reason

that you probably will want to upgrade your license. I know that in the past, there have been a few Photoshop "upgrades" that really weren't worth the cost in my opinion, but CS2 has more than enough new features in my book to warrant taking out your weary credit card. CS2 is absolutely a must-have upgrade for any serious Photoshop user.

Website: www.adobe.com/products/photoshop
Price: \$599 ■



to a new plateau, and if you do photo retouching or altering don't check it out, you've really missed a great tool.

VISUAL EFFECTS



Vfx From A to Zathura

Sony Pictures Imageworks blasts off to bring another Chris Van Allsburg favorite to the screen. **by Ryan Ball**

VISUAL EFFECTS

Bringing to life Chris Van Allsburg's children's book *The Polar Express* proved to be a wild train ride for the vfx wizards at Sony Pictures Imageworks, but nothing could prepare them for taking the reins of a suburban house bound for the stars. For *Zathura*, a sequel to Van Allsburg's *Jumanji*, the team was charged with the unique task of creating an outer space adventure that pays homage to sci-fi films of the '50s while delivering visuals that wow today's sophisticated young viewers. To get the inside scoop on what it took to realize director Jon Favreau's vision, we spoke with the film's three CG supervisors from Imageworks (who worked under the direction of Imageworks' Visual Effects Supervisor Pete Travers), David Seager (*The Aviator*, *The Matrix Revolutions*, *The Animatrix*) Bob Winter (*The Polar Express*, *Stuart Little 1 & 2*) and Bob Peitzman (*Hollow Man*, *Godzilla*, *Starship Troopers*).

Throwing rocks at the house

Like *Jumanji*, *Zathura* revolves around a very special board game with supernatural qualities. When two young brothers (played by real-life siblings Walter and Danny Budwing) come across it and decide to give it a whirl, they find their house hurtling through space, taking them on an intergalactic journey evocative of the fantastic works of Jules Verne.

The first challenge the game throws at our child heroes is a meteorite shower that rains red-hot chunks of space debris down on their home.

"That was a fun sequence to work on," says Seager. The production crew built a whole house on a huge rig that could shudder the whole structure, which had meteor holes already cut into the living room floor. "It was our job to go in and synch up with both the camera and the children's performances to basically place meteors shooting all around them," Seager explains. "It was quite a bit of work, very manual. Any one shot

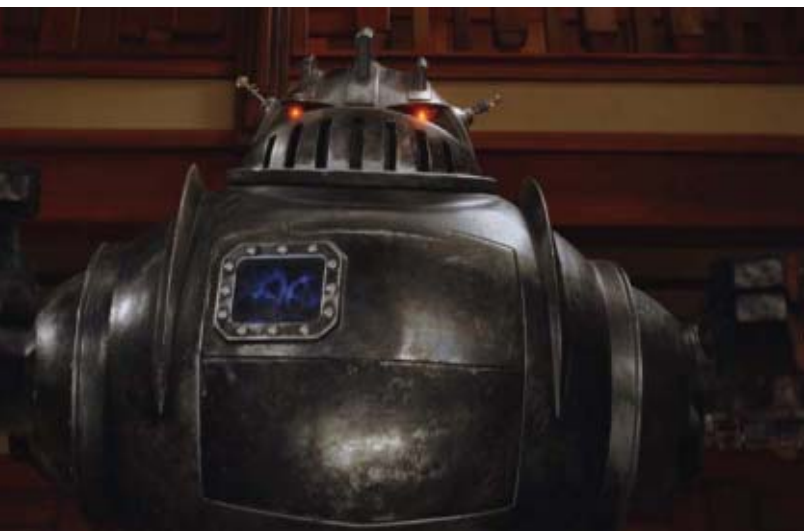
might have 60-100 meteors that pass through. We built a streamlined system where all you basically had to say in the software was where you wanted it to hit, what time you wanted it to hit and the angle you wanted it to come in at. Everything else was driven off that—the smoke trails, the sparks."

Seager tells us the whole production relied mainly on Houdini for particles and other animated effects, Maya for modeling and match moving, RenderMan for rendering and their proprietary Bonzai for compositing.

I, Robot

One of the bizarre beings the boys run into in the deepest reaches of space is a clumsy, home-wrecking android that was created with a combination of CG and practical elements. "It was a pretty even mix," notes Winter. "There were probably about six shots where we went with a full CG robot, but other than that we took the initial photography where they had a stunt guy in a black leotard with the torso of the robot on. That way they could block out where he was going to move in the room and actually have him interact with props and crash through walls. In those shots, we were responsible for adding the CG arms and legs."

Winter and his team painted out the



stuntman and filled in the robot's spindly extremities with animation, accommodating for the natural squash and stretch of the human spine by applying a piston motion between the hip and torso assemblies.

Winter was also responsible for a number of sequences involving various planets, including the shot where the boys open the front door and realize where they are. "It's a big moment in the film where it's revealed that they are in space, and I think the overall consensus was that when we saw Saturn out there, it was interesting but needed something to make it a bigger moment," he says. "What we ended up doing was getting into the rings of Saturn and built a particulate ring. We had about 25 hero asteroids that we modeled and instanced over a million of those and ended up with a composition that looked as if the porch of the house the boys were walking out onto was right at the edge of the rings."

Attack of the Zorgons!

Another sequence Seager spearheaded is a scene where the space-traveling house is besieged by a nasty race of lizard creatures known as Zorgons. The house was built in miniature and the Zorgon armada ended up being a combination of practical miniatures and CG models. Seager recalls, "[Favreau] and visual effects supervisor [Joe Bauer (*Elf*)] decided they wanted to use the practical ship for the really close-up shots. They only had one practical ship and it was about 20 feet long."

For scenes where the Zorgons are

seen in all their scaly glory, Peitzman and company used digital technology to augment the rubber, animatronic suits created by Stan Winston's studio. Since the Zorgon's 4-foot-long, puppeteered heads protrude from the actors' chests, the artists had to paint out the blue screened heads of the actors and clone in the missing scales on the aliens' backs. "For the most part, that was done with a matte painting that was hand-tracked in," Peitzman tells us.

"The heads would at times become pretty heavy, so they couldn't do a lot of running shots and things like that. At times they'd be suspended from cables on tracks, so we had to paint out the track above the cables."

The Zorgons, who travel the universe collecting garbage for fuel, also eat space goats, which look pretty much like normal goats until four eyes pop out of their heads on 6-inch stalks. "That was a little tricky because we didn't have any goat heads, goat skins, goat textures or anything, so we just had to fake a match move and build a goat head—very squashy stretchy kind of stuff," Peitzman explains. "It stands out a bit from the rest of the film but, from the director's



point of view, it helped break up the darkness of the scene."

The Black Hole

Without giving too much away, *Zathura*'s climactic sequence involves a destructive black hole, which was created by pointing the camera down at a large, black disc that had real explosions and gasses firing off underneath it. Seager says this kind of variety in the effects work kept the project interesting and enjoyable. He also speaks for the rest of the crew in noting how nice it was to have the production shooting on a nearby soundstage that they could visit regularly. "It felt a lot more like we were

Zathura rockets into theaters on November 11.

VISUAL EFFECTS



Center, the William Raegh Los Angeles Photographie Center and the Inner City Arts program in downtown L.A. The latter, which teaches animation to both elementary and high school students, is where you'll find full-time CAP teacher Ruben Esqueda, who credits his early participation in CAP with inspiring him to enroll in CalArts Experimental Animation Program and eventually become a teacher himself.



Glenna Avila



Ruben Esqueda

"When I was growing up, I never saw myself going to college," recalls Esqueda. "I was working at 16." He initially got involved with CAP's theater group and through that learned about CAP's weekly animation classes. "I'd always been drawing, and I thought that was a way to spend an afternoon," he admits. "But the mentors from CalArts really challenged me and showed me this could be more than recreation."

Esqueda later became one of the nearly 100 CAP students who've gained admittance to CalArts, and he benefited from scholarship funds that the program provides. While those funds previously were available only to CalArts enrollees, Avila notes,

continued on page 48

Community Theater

Young animators reap the rewards of a fruitful relationship between CalArts and the city of Los Angeles. **by Ellen Wolff**

Imagine sitting in a theater at L.A.'s famed Disney Concert Hall, watching one of your own animated projects playing on the big screen. Then picture that happening to you as a high school student. While that sounds like a fantasy, it's actually been a reality for scores of student animators involved in the city of Los Angeles' Community Arts Partnership (CAP) program during the past 15 years.

CAP was formed in collaboration with Los Angeles and the California Institute of the Arts, the prestigious college in the L.A. suburb of Valencia that has trained directors such as John Lasseter, Tim Burton and Brad Bird. The goal was to bring the CalArts educational approach into community centers and offer it free to young artists. CalArts faculty and students would act as mentors, working in small groups to provide personalized attention. According to program director Glenna Avila, who's been involved

with CAP since its inception, "This is the largest effort by any college in the country to offer a program free of charge. There are colleges that have fee-based programs, but we try and make this program accessible to everyone."

While CAP began with just three community centers, it now reaches students at 40 locations across L.A.'s far-flung geography. Animation training

"We tell them not to feel embarrassed about their drawing level, that drawing isn't the most important thing. It's creativity and storytelling."

—Community Arts Partnership teacher Ruben Esqueda

is offered at six sites—Banning's Landing Community Center in Wilmington, the Center for the Arts in Eagle Rock, the San Fernando Gardens Community Service Center, The Watts Towers Art

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Opportunities

continued from page 46

"This year there's funding to apply to other colleges, too." Among CAP's most notable successes is the fact that 75% of CAP participants go on to higher education, compared to 25% of students from the same neighborhoods.

Esqueda was a CAP mentor while attending CalArts, and he finds it interesting to go back there to recruit current students to become mentors. While student teachers do receive a stipend to participate in the program, Esqueda believes their interest is piqued when he shows them DVDs of past CAP animation. "They get the sense that they can experiment with the same disciplines they're studying at CalArts and also inspire others."

CAP students benefit from more than CalArts expertise, too. In 2002, the CAP program was expanded to include The Sony Pictures Media Arts Program, which has brought donations of Sony cameras and computers to five CAP sites. As Avila notes, "We've gotten wonderful donations of Macromedia software like Flash and Dreamweaver." Grant money has enabled CAP to purchase

videoconferencing equipment that connects media labs in 10 different L.A. neighborhoods, and to buy Apple Macintosh computers. (Attention CalArts alumni working at Pixar: Send memo about CAP to Steve Jobs!)

Avila observes, "Even though we set up all this technology, the CalArts method of teaching animation goes back



Blu

Blu, created by CAP elementary school students, was selected for the Syracuse International Film and Video Festival.



CAP students at Inner City Arts with CAP Faculty member and assistant dean of CalArts School of Film/Video Leo Hobaica.

Photo: Steve Gunther



to the basics. So we're teaching life drawing, with live models."

The approach taken in animation classes, which typically range from 15 to 25 students—is to treat the students like a production crew. "Everyone has a role," explains Esqueda, "and they can switch roles. The first semester is training in how to do animation, and the second semester is the production of a film. They begin by doing animatics of their ideas, which are under a minute or two. We tell them not to feel embarrassed about their drawing level, that drawing isn't the most important thing. It's creativity and storytelling."

Several CAP films have attracted attention on the festival circuit, and Avila intends to actively pursue submissions to animation competitions. The film *Blu*, created by CAP elementary school students, was selected for the Syracuse International Film and Video Festival, while high school student Josh Bitzer won a top award from the Black Hollywood Education & Resource Center for his stop-motion film *Not Meant To Last*. For Esqueda, who has 10-years' perspective at each level of CAP, the judgment is clear: "Every year has been more successful than the year before." ■

Ellen Wolff is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in visual effects, animation and education.

For more information about the Community Arts Partnership program visit www.calarts.edu/cap

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BY MIKE FISHER

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HERE IT IS, GUYS!...

SO WHAT IS YOUR ANIMATION ABOUT?...

HUH?

...I THINK THIS IS SOME OF MY BEST WORK EVER! AND I OWE IT ALL TO LIQUID GLOWGOD, A NEW FLUID MOTION PLUGIN. WITH IT, I CAN MAKE THE LAVA SWIRL, BUBBLE, SPLASH AND GLOW! AND IT'S SO EASY TO USE!

LOOKS GREAT!

COOL!

C'MON, PETE! WHAT'S THE STORY?...THE PLOT?

4H... WELL...

YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE A PLOT DO YOU?!

GUYS, I WAS GOING TO START STORYBOARDING TONIGHT!

YOU DID ALL THAT WORK ON THAT SCENE AND YOU DON'T HAVE A STORY?

DUDE, HOW COULD YOU? YOU'VE BETRAYED EVERYTHING WE, AS ARTISTS WITH INTEGRITY, STAND FOR!

"IT'S TIME TO REEVALUATE OUR RELATIONSHIP," HE SAID.

PETE, YOU'RE ALWAYS THE FIRST ONE TO CRITICIZE HOLLYWOOD FILMS FOR SPENDING TOO MUCH ENERGY ON SPECIAL EFFECTS AND NOT ENOUGH ENERGY ON A GOOD STORY! REMEMBER THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK? OR THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN? **AUEN 3?!**

GUYS, GUYS, PLEASE! IF YOU'LL JUST LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT ELSE LIQUID GLOWGOD CAN DO, I'M SURE YOU'LL AGREE THAT MY DECISION TO RECKLESSLY PLUNGE INTO MY NEXT ANIMATION WAS THE CORRECT.

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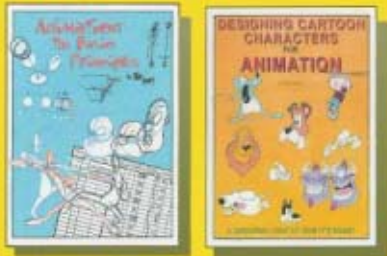
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Cartoon Colour www.cartooncolour.com	49	NATPE www.natpe.org	7
CartoonSupplies www.cartoonsupplies.com	49	nPower Software www.npowersoftware.com	59
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Full Sail www.fullsail.com	47	VanArts (Vancouver Institute of Media Arts) www.vanarts.com	29
The German Film School www.filmschool.de	49	Warner Home Video www.warnervideo.com	Back Cover
Journey Education Marketing www.journeyed.com	25		



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A Day in the Life

PARTING SHOT

We were so excited when Josh Scherr, an animator for dynamo Santa Monica gaming house Naughty Dog, decided to take a bite out of his daily routine and share with us. Maybe if we're good he'll give us a treat and a copy of Naughty Dog's *Jak X: Combat Racing*.



Using "the look," my naughty dog Arthur, tries to lull me into staying home. He is nearly successful.

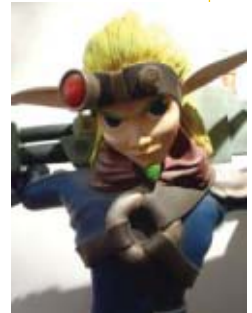


I arrive at the swank offices of Naughty Dog, where no decor expense is spared.



Ah, there's the nice sign.

The Jak statue at the entrance silently chides me for just barely making it in on time.



After checking my emails, I get back to work on a scene for the Dexter PSP game *Ready At Dawn*.



Bob Rafei, Naughty Dog's art director, ends our discussion with the traditional offering of a hug.



Onto the high priority items of the day... Yoga!



Lunchtime at Hide Sushi to celebrate our latest release - *Jak X: Combat Racing*. Not that I need an excuse to eat raw fish.



Here I am at Giant Robot, my comic book and cool t-shirt mecca.



Starting to feel the effects of post-lunch food coma.



Watergarden - the "videogame level view" from our kitchen balcony.



The two Eric's watch Charles destroy his *Jak X* opponents online. (Note the prototype banana controller in Eric's hand.)



Going over the animation schedule, I reach for a snack in chewable tablet form.



Eric, Kion, Greg and I watch a demo reel. Or maybe this was the video of the nunchucks guy falling on his face, I don't remember.

Designers Richard and Yasuhara triumphantly hold a retail copy of *Jak X: Combat Racing*. They want you to buy a copy. Look how happy they are! Don't you want them to be happy? Don't make me come over there!



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